

## As We Are by koozbane

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**Summary:** This is a NOT canon compliant, kind of (read: incredibly) Steve-centric fic picking up right after the gate is closed and following the gang(tm) afterward and into the next hectic year of their lives. Featuring the full cast, and how different everything is for them and Hawkins itself. And showing everyone that, despite appearances, it's never simply over and done. M for violence?

## 1. Bag Your Face

"What now?" It's Max who breaks the silence once the lights on the car die down. She's pushed her neon orange goggles onto the top of her head and her fingers are idly pulling at the blue bandana loosely looped around her neck. "I mean, it's over right?"

Steve's answer is quick and automatic, even if he has no clue what the truth is. "Yeah. It's over."

Without waiting for a response from any of the kids, he moves to the driver's side of the car and opens the door. There's cardboard stacked on the front seat, it's pulled up as far as it can go, and there's something taped to the pedals. He can't believe that a middle-schooler who can't even reach the pedals or see over the dash drove them here. It's a stroke of luck that the only casualties of the night so far have been a few trash cans and a mailbox. The adults - the *real* adults - are going to kill him if they find out about this.

Somewhere behind him, Dustin yells "Shotgun!" and only a few seconds later he's clambered into the front passenger seat.

"I could drive us back." Max chimes in quickly, pulling out the keys to her step brother's car and twirling them around one finger. "I was *really* starting to get the hang of those turns. This is like the best Driver's Ed course ever."

The grin on her face reads as joking and playful but the tone of her voice is way too close to serious. Steve holds a hand out, palm up, and gives her what is hopefully a stern look. It must be close enough because the redhead heaves an overdramatic sigh, looks up to the sky and drops the keys into his waiting hand. She makes sure to roll her eyes at him to emphasize how she doesn't think this is a fair decision, but she ends up piling into the backseat with Mike and Lucas anyway. He's sure he can hear her grumbling about how *he* isn't in much of a position to be driving them either, but he ignores it and the bait for an argument. They just beat off a hoard of monster dogs, he doesn't need to stoop to arguing with a thirteen year old girl. He's the one in charge here.

While the munchkins get settled inside, Steve leans against the side of the car and pushes everything from the seat onto the ground. There's no way he's going to be able to fit it in the backseat with the kids and he is definitely not about to rummage through the trunk of the car of some crazy guy who beat his face in earlier to make more room. The cardboard lands in an uncoordinated pile on the ground, he kicks it out of the way of the door.

The blocks on the pedals need to go next. Pushing the seat back, he crouches beside the car to wiggle the blocks out of the tape and those get dumped on the ground too. He stays down like that for a few moments, debating whether or not to peel the tape off of the pedals too. In the end it's a lot of effort and time he simply doesn't want to invest and he braces himself on the seat to help push himself back up. The movement is too fast. His head spins and bile rises in his throat and god, he's sure he's about to ralph all over someone else's car and Dustin is staring at him from the passenger side - he has to pull himself together, for fuck's sake.

"Steve?" Mike leans forward to squint at him around the front seat, looking more impatient than concerned. "What are you doing?"

"Enjoying the view." He says, but the words come out half shoved together and flat. The would-be joke turns into an awkward moment of silence for their ruined night. "Time to go."

The older boy jerks his head quickly in a nod, dropping into the driver's seat. He cradles the nail bat in his hands for a few moments before tucking it in on the left as he shuts the door. They all ignore the sharp noise echoing through the darkness as one of the nails meets the metal of the door, and Steve listens to everyone breathe and thinks he's lucky the otherworldly beasts beneath the ground were more interested in Hopper and El than them. He thinks he's lucky Dustin isn't dead because he just hadn't been fast enough to get just *one* more kid out of that hole.

Steve jabs the key into the ignition and lets the car rumble beneath them as he twists around in his seat to make sure all of the younger teens have buckled themselves in. Then he fumbles his own buckle into the latch. He misses once, twice, even tugs on the belt to double-check after hearing the metal *click!* to make sure he's not just hearing

things. Lucas and Dustin exchange a Look and he adjusts the rear view mirror with one hand, the other jabbing a finger to the map discarded on the middle console. "One of you little shits better make sure we don't get lost."

They're a good ten minutes into the drive when Steve's vision doubles and he decides that Max may have been right and he shouldn't be driving, but it's too late. They're already in the car and on their way and no one would have known how to find them even if they had decided to just stay and wait. Plus, he's the only one who actually knows how to drive. Max might not have killed them on their run out here but Steve has risked his life enough for one night.

Dustin ends up navigating for him, the others all too busy riding the high of their victory to be bothered paying attention to the road. This is what he gets for calling shotgun, though, he has to miss out on some of the whispering and the early reliving of recent events. Steve latches onto bits and pieces of it ("Did you see when-" "-okay but what about-" "-do you think-" "-what's Will-") but for the most part he keeps his attention on the road.

Eventually he catches a glimpse of himself in one of the mirrors. He looks awful, and that's not something he would put out there lightly. Even last year after fighting with Jonathon he hadn't looked like this. There are mottled red, purple, and black bruises across his face and his lip is swollen, split, and bloody. There's more dried blood around his eyebrow and lip and his swollen eyes. The more he sneaks glances at himself the more he starts to think his nose is probably broken, and he notices a particularly ugly cut on his jaw that someone has haphazardly stuck a band-aid on. There are a few other spots like this on his face, where he's been hit enough times that the skin has bruised and split, all partially hidden underneath colorful bandages that must have come from the Byers emergency medical kit.

"Okay. Take a right." Dustin points to the right, as if Steve suddenly doesn't remember his directions. He's a little offended. "We're almost there."

Max and Mike give groans of relief and Lucas huffs out "Finally. We've been driving for twenty minutes!"

It takes another seven minutes to get there. Twenty-seven minutes. Steve thinks that's a long time to have been passed out on the way there. Almost half an hour is long enough to have missed God only knows what. How fast was Max when they were driving, before? How fast has *he* been driving?

Unfortunately, the kids give him no time to question these things (or any of them for that matter) as they all make a mad dash for the house. Steve isn't sure how they have the energy to run at all after everything they've been through tonight. He hardly even has the energy to grab his bat, shove himself up out of the car and go inside. He's slow, feet dragging the ground before he leans on the house near the door the boys left open. He pauses, listening to the younger teenagers scamper around, and then shifts inside and uses one foot to kick the door shut behind him. It's unreasonably loud but no one else seems bothered by it, too concerned with... something.

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas are all in the living room, shoving at each other's shoulders and whispering loudly. The redhead of the group is mysteriously gone, gloves goggles and bandana discarded on the floor by the door. The nail bat joins the other inanimate objects, knocking into the wall a little more loudly than intended. The boys seem to notice him then, all looking to him with mixed looks of excitement and maybe apprehension?

He makes his way over to them with one hand on the wall, eyebrows rising higher the closer he gets. Now that Lucas and Dustin have stepped to the side he can see something - someone sprawled out across the floor. Someone with bruises blooming on their cheek and an ugly mullet and bloody, purple and red knuckles. Billy Hargrove doesn't look nearly as bad as he does and if it weren't for the fact that he fought off literal monsters tonight Steve might be embarrassed. He still doesn't get too close, opting instead to shove the toe of his shoe into the blonde boy's ribs and then armpit to see if he reacts. Nothing.

There's a bit of adrenaline and panic still drumming a tune deep in his chest, causing his heart to pick up a bit as he looks the other boy over. His head pounds and his stomach flips and Steve isn't sure if its because he got his ass kicked earlier or because he's still waiting for another creature to come hurtling through the window in an attempt

to kill them.

This is probably the first time he's ever seen Billy with his big mouth shut and his face not full of manic energy. It might be a miracle, but it's also incredibly weird for them all to look at. He looks almost peaceful like this. Steve still kind of wants to kick him in the face, just once, to make them even. He doesn't, opting instead to nudge him in the side with his foot again.

When Billy continues to not move at all, Dustin grins up at him. "Cool, right? Max shot him up with that horse tranquilizer or whatever."

Speak of the devil, the only girl currently with the Party steps out from the hallway with a poorly repaired skateboard underneath one arm. She looks annoyed, brows drawn in and a frown set on her face. Maybe she doesn't think it's cool. She shifts the skateboard so that it's being held in both hands and her frown deepens.

But... it's not *not* cool. Steve isn't sure he wants to be encouraging potential assault and drugging other people, though, so he gives a vague shrug and leans his shoulder against the wall to rest while he observes the scene in front of him and tracks the leftover destruction from their earlier fight.

Some of the drawings have been shifted across the floor from where he hit the ground, and where Billy must have dropped on the ground as well. There are a few personal belongings scattered along the floor too, and glass spreads all the way from the kitchen to the hallway and the back door. Some of it is thick and pasty white (the plate, Steve decides) and some of it is clear and long (something that hit the floor when he hit the shelf) but other than that nothing looks too broken or out of sorts. Well, no more than any other time he's seen the inside of the Byers' house. Which is not saying a lot, really?

His train of thought is cut off when the kids start talking again, all looking at the drooling boy on the floor. His head throbs the more he looks at him and his stomach won't settle all the way, reminding him to be careful of how quickly he moves around.

"Creep." Dustin raises his nose and squints down at Billy, "What

should we do with him?"

Steve doesn't know, doesn't care at this exact moment. What he does care about is the uncomfortable, thick layer of grime and dried blood on his face and how much he wants to get it off of him. So he moves again, this time putting his weight on the wall farthest from Billy and the kids. Then it's just a short trek the bathroom to get a better look at himself. His gaze catches on the burnt floor in the hallway as he passes it, shoes crunching on the scattered pieces of the plate that made contact with his head.

Two years in a row he's found himself involved in some weird, life-risking, supernatural experience at the Byers' house. Maybe it will become a tradition. Steve reasons with himself that it's not *that* weird; supernatural experiences are just drawn to the Byers house and the Byers as a family and Nancy is drawn to weird things and the Byers and Steve is going to continue to use her as his excuse for being so unfortunately entrenched in this shit. (Even if that's not really it, and he'll eventually have to admit that to himself.) It... kind of makes sense, as much sense as anything can make right now, so he nods to himself in approval.

The bathroom light is already on when he opens the door. It's bright enough to make Steve's head ache and bring his nausea back full force. He stumbles, catches himself on the toilet. His hands are shaking a little as he chokes and coughs, heaves into the porcelain throne a few times. The action makes his throat tighten even as he vomits twice, flushes double that to try to hide the sound. While his insides set themselves on fire he reaches blindly for the sink to pull himself up, turns on the tap so that he can splash some ice cold water into his face.

The kids are still talking in the other room, apparently too distracted by their captive to be bothered by his disappearance. He uses this to his advantage, takes his sweet time pressing cold water and palms to his eyes and cheeks. It feels good, relieves some of the burning sensation from his eyes and helps ease his stomach to something closer to calm. The water runs a nasty brown-red from the blood on his face so he repeats the action a few times until it's only slightly discolored like old dish water.

"He stinks." Steve is pretty sure he can pinpoint that voice as Lucas. "I bet you made him piss himself." He can imagine the look on the younger boy's face, a mixture of relief and amusement. "That was *totally* tubular."

After a few moments listening to the water churning in the sink Steve turns it off, braces his hands on the sink and looks himself over in the mirror. The swelling hasn't really gone down at all and the bruising around his nose is nearly black with how purple it is. He raises one hand to touch the split skin near his temple, on his lip, his jaw, forces himself to look into his own eyes. They're glassy, unfocused, moving over his reflection in such a way that he thinks he looks almost drunk. He reaches up and rubs at his eyes in an effort to clear them, ignores the dirt that spreads across his cheekbones and the way it makes his nose hurt.

All in all, Steve decides he looks like shit. Which isn't surprising, and he honestly could have just come to that conclusion based on what he glimpsed of himself in the car but it's probably good to properly assess the damage. He curses to himself, runs a hand through his hair, and curses even more when it comes away sticky and red. When he parts his hair and tilts his head he can see the outline of a cut across his scalp, not deep but still irritating. He eyes it for a moment before deciding it's not serious and parts his hair back over the cut. He'll deal with it later.

"We shouldn't leave him here." Surprisingly enough, it's Max's disembodied voice that suggests moving him.

When Steve wanders back out the expression on her face reads less of concern for her stepbrother and more of embarrassment, guilt. When she notices him staring she turns it back into annoyance so easily that he wonders if he imagined it. Maybe he did. Maybe he took one too many hits to the head and he's seeing things now. He looks over at her again from the corner of his eyes and she furrows her brows at him.

"We could put him in the woods." Lucas suggests conversationally, nodding to himself.

This prompts Mike to put in his two cents. "Lock him in the shed?"

"Float him out to the middle of the lake?" Dustin sounds a little too excited.

The only girl in the room snorts. "Take him to the hole?"

"Hide him in the junkyard?"

"There's the huge dumpsters behind Melvald's, bet he fits in there."

"If we dropped him by the Hideaway someone would probably pick him up."

"The train station isn't too far away, either. Bet tickets are cheap." That one is definitely not true, Steve is almost entirely sure the train station is another twenty minute drive.

Cutting off their fantasies of turning Billy Hargrove into the next missing person from Hawkins is probably the responsible thing to do. "Hey." They ignore him, so he takes another step toward the living room, leaning his weight on the door frame. "Hello! Listen, shitheads-" Steve stops, because he can hear the slur to his voice from how messed up his face is. He licks his lips, tries again. "He can't stay in here. But we are *not* committing a felony kidnapping."

The kids are all huddled over the blonde boy now, trying to get him sitting halfway upright on Max's skateboard to move him. They all go still when he looks at them, mixed defiance and exhaustion written on their features. It's a real blast of *déjà vu* from a few hours ago. Steve pushes off from the doorway to move around the back of the couch toward them. Billy Hargrove is an asshole. But that doesn't mean he wants him to be a dead asshole, so someone has to be half responsible here.

"Fine." Lucas looks the most offended out of all of them, which is understandable. He has pretty good reason to be mad. "What do we do with him, then?"

They all manage to drag Billy outside and only hit his head off of one (1) door on the way there. Everyone winces at the sound but the mullet wearing boy doesn't budge so they don't put him down. Steve's original plan had involved pouring Billy into the passenger side of his

own car and driving him off to... somewhere. Maybe home. Maybe a mile or two away. Maybe a short walk from his own home. But getting him out of the front door is proving to be enough of a task, his head is throbbing and his chest aches, and quite frankly the kids are probably putting more muscle into it than he is at this point.

So instead they dump him on the couch outside. He's a little too big, a little too long, but they manage to get him halfway situated. One of his feet is hanging over the armrest opposite his head and his other leg is hardly even on the couch, one arm raised above his head and the other on his chest. After giving her stepbrother a good once-over Max gives a satisfied shrug and nod and heads in. The boys quickly follow, bickering about something else now, hopping from topic to topic too quickly for him to follow in his current state.

With only the two older boys outside it's very quiet, aside from the distance hum of a car engine. Quiet and cold and *dark*. Steve lingers on this thought for a long time, looking down at his classmate with an uncomfortable frown. It seems almost wrong, leaving him out here with whatever else lurks in the dark and likes the cold. Maybe later he'll ask Ms. Byers where the blankets are, to at least make sure the wastoid doesn't freeze to death. (Even if he does kind of deserve it.)

"Steve!" His head whips to the side and everything tilts for a moment. Dustin is staring at him from the doorway. "Are you planning on staying out here all night, too? It's fucking freezing."

Shooting his young friend a glare, he slowly makes his way forward. "I've been out here for a minute, maybe, asshole."

"More like ten!"

Ten minutes sounds like a major exaggeration. Rolling his eyes, he nudges the shorter brunette back into the house and follows. The door clicks shut behind them, leaving the biggest asshole of them all outside. The younger teens are all settling now, the adrenaline falling out of their systems the longer they're all forced to sit and play the Waiting Game.

Max is in the kitchen, picking something up from the floor and replacing it on the shelf with surprising care. Mike has taken a spot

on the couch, looking around at the drawings pasted all over the walls, the floors, and occasionally looking out the window. Lucas is finishing a walk around the house, clicking on another lamp to bathe the room in light. The only shadows in the room hide behind the t.v. and under a shelf near the kitchen. Dustin rejoins his friends, muttering something about the dirt. Steve debates sitting on the couch or in the kitchen but in the end he wants to be close to the kids, a door (an exit), and his bat - so he leans against a wall in the living room and sinks down to the floor and lets the television droning on in the background distract him for a while.

Twenty minutes go by and Steve stops watching the clock, listens to *Night Flight* filter through the t.v. speakers and lets his eyes close, for a moment. He must fall asleep again, just for a few minutes, because the sound of a car door jolts him awake. His first instinct is to shift forward, which makes his stomach lurch, so he has to take a moment to breathe. Mike is already looking out of the window for him, though, and his face lights up immediately.

"It's El!" The boy shoves away from the window to the front door and swings it open a little too quickly, bounces into the wall loudly, but Steve can't blame him for his excitement. "Hey!"

Lucas throws his hands up in frustration. "We know you missed your girlfriend but you could - *Mike!*" He's met with a laugh from Dustin who bounds out the door next. "You barf bag!"

As he utilizes the wall to get to his feet the two boys crowd through the doorway, too excited to wait for the Chief and his companion to get inside to say their hellos. Max, as much a stranger to El as him, hangs back and watches. Steve has never formally met El but Nancy told him enough to get an idea, and the slip ups from the kids have given him a better understanding of who she is. That is to say, he understands she's important and also made a middle-schooler piss himself in public, once.

By the time Steve manages to get to the door the kids are piling through the front door. He has to flatten himself against the wall for them to pass and over their shoulders he can see the Chief leaning down to look inside of Billy's car with a flashlight. "Whose car is this?" He stands up straight and looks around, spots him standing in

the doorway. He points the flashlight at him in question. "Is this - holy shit, kid." His expression twists. "What happened to your face?"

Aside from the commotion of the kids inside it's quiet, for a few moments. The older man opens the car door, reaches inside the car and turns it off (did he really not do that earlier?) and then shuts the door again. As he approaches Steve hazards a shrug. "Nothing," he says, almost convincing himself, goes for funny instead at the last second. "I'm trying something new, a look."

Hopper looks like he wants to say more the more he looks at him, looking around with the torch in his hand. When he gets within arms' reach he seems to have a change of thought, rocking back on his heels and narrowing his eyes. He doesn't say anything, just inspects him for a while before steering him inside with a hand on his shoulder. He ends up finding blankets, handing one out to each kid and helping El settle on the couch. (Steve discreetly slips his to Max who quietly makes it disappear and if the police chief notices anything he doesn't say.) He directs Steve to the kitchen next, face stern as he says "Sit." and jabs his thumb to one of the chairs. "C'mon, kid, we don't have all night. It's late."

Any argument Steve had dies in his throat with the way he looks at him. So he settles into the wooden seat and leans back to get comfortable, doesn't mention that they all have to stay awake to wait for the others anyway.

There's no clock in sight to keep track by, but judging by the ache that settles into his shoulders Steve thinks they've been there for some time. Hopper wipes the last of the dried blood from his face, uses more colorful bandages to hide the bruises and cuts spotted across his features. He even cleans the one on the side of his head, though he doesn't put a bandage on it. Says something about it being minor, scar-worthy but not hospital-worthy, probably. Steve feels himself drifting on more than one occasion, head bobbing and shoulders slumping until the older man snaps his fingers in his face.

"Doing that a lot?" He asks, and when the only response he gets is a confused look he sighs hard. "Nodding off?"

"No." Steve says quickly, at the same time Dustin pipes up with a

'yeah.' He grimaces and Hopper sighs once again, dropping the red soaked rag into the trash. "Maybe once or twice. Can't blame a guy for wanting to take a nap; it's been a long day, it's late." He echoes the older man from earlier, a half smile quirked on his lips.

The joke seems to miss its mark, much like the last one. Hopper grunts something noncommittal as a reply, but before he can really get sucked into a lecture a distraction saves them in the form of the front door finally (*finally*) opening, with Will and Joyce easing through the door. They both look pale and exhausted but *relieved* and *happy*. Nancy and Jonathan are close behind, all intimate murmurs and measured looks. Hopper leaves his side, drifts automatically into the room and wraps his arms around Mrs. Byers. He must say something funny because she laughs, a wet and sad sound that breaks the silence.

"Welcome home." Eleven says from the couch, and it pulls another laugh from the older woman.

Mike, Dustin, and Lucas practically knock each other over in their effort to greet the last member of the Party. The girls remain slumped in the middle of the couch, watching the exchange. It's a nice moment where everyone is knocking shoulders and trying to forget that they all almost died (again) tonight. Nancy takes Mike by the shoulders once he's disconnected himself from his best friends. She gestures to his dirty clothes and the goggles on his forehead and he shrugs, looking defensive. The older girl searches his face for a second before she hugs him and his expression slips, morphs into surprise as he returns the gesture.

Everyone seems so close, so knit together and perfectly arranged in this disaster riddled house.

Steve feels very out of place. He eyes the back door, cracked open so that the Chief could smoke a cigarette and not fill the house with smoke, and wonders if he could make a quiet escape. He would have to walk home, choose between cutting through the woods and taking extra time to walk on the sidewalks surrounded by streetlamps.

All plans of escape do a dive right off of the handle pretty quickly. Will notices him first, wide eyes catching on him while he's taking in

his somewhat destroyed home. Jonathan follows his gaze next, raises his eyebrows and shoots a look to Nancy before looking back at him. She seems to understand whatever he's trying to silently convey because she releases her brother and turns, gasps out something that he doesn't quite catch. She moves toward him, abandoning Jonathan and both of their siblings by the couch.

"Gnarly." Will breathes out and Steve gives him a warning look, raising one hand, pointer finger up, to defend himself.

"It's fine, Nance." She gives him a roll of her eyes and a shake of her head. "Seriously! Look, I'm fine." He stands up, walks in as straight a line as he can to prove his point.

It must not be very convincing. She seems to reprimand him without speaking, sharp brows pushed down and nose wrinkled in distaste. He expects her to call him an idiot. She doesn't, but her hands do find his shoulders and direct him back toward the table. He's almost disappointed. "I am looking. You look terrible." It might be true but she certainly isn't pulling any punches. "*This* isn't really what I would picture beside the definition of 'fine.' Have you seen yourself?"

Steve sighs and tries to sink back into his seat, because he clearly is not going to be able to avoid this. "Yeah, yeah, of course I've seen myself. It's really-" he pauses, tries to ignore the way his words slink together and slur, and shrugs. "-it's not as bad as it looks."

Jonathan joins them next, leans his hip against the table and does a really shitty job of hiding his grimace. His mother is close behind him, face tight with worry and upset as she catches sight of him. He isn't sure how to take that look. She moves past her son, uses one hand to push his hair out of his face and the other raising his chin so she can get a proper look at him. It's... weird. Nice? Really weird. Steve looks over at the oldest Byers boy and his expression has shifted toward vague amusement. He's trapped.

"It's fine - *I'm* fine, Mrs. Byers, really." Steve laughs but it comes out wobbly and he feels mixed relief and disappointment when Mrs. Byers retreats a few steps and corrects him simply with 'Joyce.'

"Does the other guy look worse?" Jonathan is giving him one of those

weird, 'I'm trying' half smiles that doesn't look quite comfortable. The effort is appreciated regardless.

Steve laughs, rubs a thumb over his cupid's bow automatically and wonders if Billy is still outside. "Yeah, you should see him."

"We should have some ice around here." Mrs. Byers - *Joyce*, Steve has to remind himself - steps toward the refrigerator with a frown. "Or frozen peas." She nods, more to herself than anything, one hand on the door to the freezer. She looks at him and takes a breath, the sound harsh. "Has - has Hop taken a look at you?"

Giving a nod, Steve looks around the room. There's still some glass on the floor and water dripping from the counter where a lot of frozen dinners and a bag of peas has been left out to thaw for hours. A bag of peas. Joyce still has her hand on the freezer door.

"Shit! No!" Dustin beats him to the yelling by a fraction of a second, looking horrified. They're still too late. The freezer door makes a sick squelching noise as it opens. "No, no, no!" A very large, cold, and **very** dead Demodog slides out of the freezer, hits the tile with a solid *thwump!* that makes everyone jump. "Shit!"

"Fuck!" Steve yelps out in return and he's met with a chorus of similar sentiments.

"What the *hell?*"

"Damn it, guys!"

"It smells."

The swaddled monster-pet-thing lands on one of Joyce's feet and she hisses through her teeth, stalks backward, kicks at it with a low sound. The look of horror and disgust on her face is picture worthy. Steve has automatically pushed himself to his feet, braced against the chair because he doesn't totally trust his legs. Nancy and Jonathan have both stepped forward as well, eyes locked on the dead mutt, looking ready to fight despite their lack of weapons.

Dustin launches himself into the situation with all of the finesse of, well, a thirteen year old who thinks his greatest scientific discovery

(that they can't even talk about anyway) has just been dumped on the floor like a bag of flaming dog feces. "Put it back! Put it back!"

"Dustin," Steve starts, but the boy is aiming big brown eyes at him and waving his arms frantically.

"We have to *preserve* it, Steve. For *science*. This could be the discovery of our century - of our *lives*. Someone has to investigate it." The younger boy insists. "Come *on*."

Nancy turns sharply on her heels to look at her brother, who has moved closer and is picking gunk out from under his nails. "Mike!" He jumps, glares right back at her. "You can't just put dead-" she gestures to the creature on the floor. "-*things* into people's freezers!"

"I *didn't*!" He huffs back at her. "Steve did it!"

And then she's glaring at him and, no, no way is he going to go down with this ship. He raises both hands in defeat, ready for her to verbally kick his ass, and shakes his head. "No I didn't." He backtracks a second later. "Well, okay, maybe, but it wasn't really-"

"Steve!" Nancy throws her hands up in frustration.

"Alright, alright!" Before anyone can get too upset Hopper cuts in, blocking the Demodog from view and waving his hand in the air. He looks tired, maybe a little annoyed but mostly tired. "Out of the kitchen, away from the nasty mutt. We'll bury it." He considers this for a moment, looks out the back door at the lack of light and frowns. "Tomorrow."

Once again, Steve is given the task of hauling the half thawed Demodog into the freezer. Jonathan stays to help him, at least. They don't really talk about it, the freezer door propped against one of their backs as they each lift one end and shove it back into the metal cabinet. It's easier this time; its limbs are stiff and cold and its head is already craned down towards its chest so they sort of just push it inside and go.

"So?" Jonathan looks at him once the door is closed, eyes searching his face. Or maybe just taking it in again. He shuffles his feet, pockets

his hands and glances away. "What happened?"

Steve sighs and brings a hand to his hair, they exchange a hard look. As much as he doesn't want to admit to getting his ass kicked again, everyone is inevitably going to find out whether he likes it or not. Billy will probably have spread his victory around the school like butter on bread by next week. Even if he doesn't, the boys will tell Will who is going to tell Jonathan who will tell his mother and Nancy and Hopper. It's a vicious grapevine of gossip, something none of them are ever going to be able to escape because Hawkins is a small town black hole.

Heaving another sigh, he leans into the wall and crosses his arms. "Hargrove was here." Jonathan nods patiently, expectantly, probably having recognized the car parked beside his own in the driveway. Steve hadn't really thought about that. "He was looking for Max, being an even bigger prick than usual. He had Lucas up against the wall, man." He sighs again, has to resist the urge to run a hand through his hair.

When he trails off Jonathan grinds his teeth for a moment, either deep in thought or not sure of how to respond. Another minute passes like this, quiet and not necessarily uncomfortable, before the older boy finds himself speaking up again. Steve has never been good at sitting in silence, and just hearing the vague rumbles of conversation from the other room is making him fidgety.

"He shouldn't've made it in the house." Steve makes a frustrated noise, tries to ignore how some of his words run together. "But he was-"

Lucas slips into the room, obviously having overheard the conversation, and shows no hesitation in cutting him off. It saves Steve the embarrassment of telling the part where he didn't plant his feet and Billy knocked him around outside. "He was mental - smashed a plate over Steve's head and everything."

"What?" That catches Jonathan's attention, bringing his gaze to the younger boy. "A plate? One of our plates?"

"Yeah. It was like - wham - smash-" Lucas makes a couple jabbing and

punching motions, mimicking the earlier throwdown before miming smashing a plate. The action is so full of energy that his bandana slips down to cover one of his eyebrows. He pauses, looks almost contrite. "We thought he was going to, you know," a vague slicing gesture at his neck. "So Max used some of that stuff the Chief had for Will and knocked him out."

They all go quiet for long enough that Steve starts to fidget, rubs the back of his neck and shakes his head. "Alright, okay, story time is over. Isn't it past your bedtime?" The moment passes and Lucas scoffs, turns on his heel and returns to the other room. "That's right, you better book it."

As soon as he's out of earshot Jonathan is turning a critical gaze on him. Steve fumbles under that look, mentally stuttering and giving him the chance to run the conversation. "No wonder you look like shit."

"Thanks." It's the only response Steve has and he tries to sound as sarcastic as possible. He wants to storm out of the room like a toddler but he's just tired and in pain and it would sort of ruin the point if he looks like total shit while doing it. "You guys are really laying it on thick tonight, you know. First Nancy, now you, it's like you guys are conspiring against me or something."

Something flashes on Jonathan's face, like he thinks he's being made fun of or something. Before he can get out a response though, his mother is stepping into the room to interrupt. She beckons him away quietly, saying something about blankets and rearranging the living room. When he looks back Steve catches his eyes and tries very hard not to see the concern flickering there.

This, unfortunately, does not mean Steve escapes the gaze of one Joyce Byers. She sizes him up before putting a gentle hand on his arm and leading him back out into the living room as well. He's delegated to Pillow Duty. Which means he has to make sure everyone has at least one (1) pillow. It's a very easy job, but he still 'accidentally' gives the kids all of the extras.

When he's done he slides down the wall and takes in everything around him. At first he watches Nancy go around with Jonathan,

handing out blankets and listening to the Party as they go over the events of the night for them. Nancy cuts him a few careful looks when she thinks he isn't looking and Jonathan settles a hand on her shoulder once or twice. He shifts his gaze to someone else, then. He doesn't want to talk about any of the weird things going on, right now. He just wants a break, he wants the night to be over so he can wake up tomorrow and ice his face and everything can go back to normal.

Joyce deals with their sleeping arrangements next. She sets up Max and Nancy in Jonathan's room, while he and his family take Joyce's bedroom. Hopper and El are given Will's room. Everyone else is in the living room, smeared across the floor in piles of blankets or fighting for a position on the couch. There's some mild complaining from the kids, insisting that they should all be allowed to stay together because, really, they deserve it. Hopper says they're all lucky he doesn't drive them home just for arguing. They give in eventually, though, weighed down by the night and tired enough that they've lost the energy to fight.

While everyone else is saying their 'good night's Steve decides to sneak out the back door. He sits on the ground, fishes out a partially smashed pack of cigarettes that were forgotten in one of his pockets, and lights a cigarette. The filter between his lips tastes like dirt and freedom, a little bit of escape rolled into a cylinder. It feels like an incredibly normal, rebellious teenage thing to do. He almost feels like they didn't all nearly die tonight or get his ass kicked by some highschool bully. When he inhales it leaves him lightheaded and when he exhales the only thing he can feel is the smoke leaving his lungs. It helps.

"Hey." His head snaps up in surprise at the soft voice behind him. Joyce Byers smiles down at him, careful and kind and far more than he deserves. "Do you happen to have any more of those?"

His response is quick, automatic, and clearly a lie. "No." The disbelieving look she gives him and the pack of cigarettes sitting beside his foot has his face heating up. He holds the cigarettes out to her, trying to act apologetic and expecting a lecture. Instead she slides down the side of the house to sit by him, takes a cigarette from the pack and lights it with a deep inhale. She seems to loosen up at

that, shoulder dropping as she hands back the little pack of cancer sticks.

"Our secret." She says and shares a small smile with him. It feels... nice. Steve hazards a smile in return. His own mother would have had a conniption seeing him smoke. She releases a breath and he watches the smoke dance in the air.

When Steve speaks up it's more to himself than anything, but he can't help the way his lips quirk upward. "One of many."

That gets a real laugh out of Joyce, where her head tips back and her shoulders shake a bit. It's a nice sound, light and comforting in the night, but a bit rough. As if she hasn't really done it in a while. He thinks that wouldn't be too surprising, she probably hasn't had much to laugh about between Will's disappearance and fighting off various sized demons. They finish their cigarettes in silence.

It's not uncomfortable, at the very least. Steve finds himself able to settle against the house with the light falling out from the windows, verging on content for the moment despite the cold air and the way the time seems to stretch and stretch until his fingers and toes are going numb and the smell of the cigarette smoke starts to turn his stomach. He feels exhausted, suddenly, dizzy. By the time they're stubbing their cigarettes out in the dirt and getting ready to go inside, he's stopped even raising it to his lips and trying to hit it. He sits there, lets the cold bite at him until Joyce is on her feet and holding a hand out to him.

Her hand is warm in his when she helps him up and the world does a twirl around him, reminds him that slow and steady is better right now. Steve feels like he's falling, head light and the world tumbling around him. His free hand wheels in the air for a moment before finding the side of the house and using it to steady himself. He blinks once, twice, thrice, and his vision steadies itself and focuses on Joyce Byers.

"Thank you." He says. Or... he thinks he says. The look on Ms. Byers' face implies that's not quite what came out.

She squeezes his hand, the other finds his shoulder. Her brown eyes

are as warm as her hands. "Steve. Sweetheart. Look at me." He didn't realize he *wasn't* looking at her anymore. He moves his gaze from over her shoulder to her face. "Are you alright?"

He blinks slowly. Once. Takes a breath in. Blinks twice. Nods. Joyce starts to direct him inside again. He stumbles over his own feet once and nearly takes them both to the ground. The older woman does her best to keep him from doing it a second time, slowing her steps and slinging his arm over her shoulders. He's never been so grateful for some help in his life. Jonathan meets them at door, halfway through opening it when they get there. He looks surprised, it's a funny expression for him.

"Oh, good, Jonathan." She smiles at him, pushes the boy leaning on her in his direction. She says something to him but Steve misses it, caught up in watching the kids and Nancy over her shoulder. They're talking pretty excitedly, he wonders if they're still relaying the events of the night. Maybe they'll tell her he was badass, fighting off Demodogs for them. "Hop!" She disappears down the hallway and he tries to relieve some of his weight from the younger boy. "*Jim!*"

In the meantime, Jonathan is hauling him towards the couch. Steve can recognize, somewhere in his head, that the taller boy is talking to him so he nods his head a couple times. "Yeah." The look he receives is pretty bewildered so that must not have been an applicable response. One more try, then. "What are you doing?"

"We're going-" he starts with that funny half smile stuck on his face, but then he trips and they both hit the floor like a sack of bricks. Steve thinks he needs to empty his stomach again. Jonathan pushes at his shoulder to roll him onto his back and he takes a rough breath. "Shit, are you okay?"

The answer to that question is probably 'no' but Steve feels himself nodding anyway. Nancy appears over him, whispering something quickly that flies through one ear and out of the other immediately. There's worry set in the dip between her brows and tired fear under her eyes. It's not a good look for her. He tries to vocalize this, lifting one hand to get her attention, but what actually comes out is: "That look is not a good look."

He feels more than sees the younger boy blowing out an exasperated breath above him. Next thing he knows Jonathan has his hands under his armpits, shifting him from the floor to the couch. Hopper is there next, gently pushing the other boys out of the way and easing Nancy to the side as he crouches in front of him. One large hand tilts his head to one side and then the other, making it hard to focus. He looks less than satisfied with what he's seeing, brows furrowed and jaw set.

"His eyes are bloodshot." Hopper starts, acting as if he isn't still sitting right in front of him. "You passed out earlier?" It takes Steve a minute to realize this is directed at him. He nods. "You been sick at all? Having any vision problems?"

Steve nods. "Some. A little." He reaches up to rub his eyes because they're hot and they itch but someone catches his hand, stops the movement. He sluggishly drops his hand back to his lap. "S'not that bad."

The slurred words are apparently not convincing. The older man rubs his chin as he looks him over again. Steve closes his eyes, counts to three. "It might be a concussion." Nobody says what else it could be. It could be anything, really, considering they've all spent time in the Upside Down recently. "Don't move." Hopper says, face serious and set in stone, and he snorts in response.

The adults (with Nancy and Jonathan in tow, refusing to be left out of the conversation) retreat back to the kitchen and Steve sinks into the couch cushions as much as he can in their absence. He's so comfortable he even starts drifting off, until someone takes over the spot beside him on the couch and starts poking and prodding at him until he's forced to open his eyes. Dustin is settled close to him, frowning and wrinkling his nose.

"Hey buddy." The words come out slowly, even to him. He's so tired. "I thought it was-"

"-past our bedtime?" The curly haired young man rolls his eyes dramatically, sighing at him. "You already used that one on Lucas, dingbat." A pause. "You're supposed to stay awake, I think."

So he does, because it's not like Dustin is giving him a choice in the matter. Every time his eyes slip shut or his head starts to bob he gets a sharp jab in the arm or a gentle jiggle of his shoulder. He's careful to avoid his bruises ribs and his wrecked face, and Steve is grateful. He isn't sure how much more his body could handle tonight.

The other adults emerge some time later, maybe fifteen minutes, and start herding the kids into their respective sleeping spots. Steve briefly acknowledges that they've changed around some sleeping arrangements, El going off with Joyce and Hopper setting up a chair in the living room. He turns up the heat, locks all the windows and doors, leaves two different lights on in the house for them before he actually drops into his blanket-coated chair for the night. Mike and Lucas are already a jumble of limbs on the floor and Dustin is snoring loudly at his side. He nudges him and the smaller boy droops, elbow hitting the armrest.

"You okay, kid?" Hopper asks, the first time of many, and Steve blinks at him slowly and shrugs. He's not, but none of them really are and he'll probably be better tomorrow. The older man sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose and rolls his shoulders as he leans back in his chair. "We're gonna wake you up every few hours, got that? You feel sick at all you tell me, pronto."

Steve wants to make some joke about how *pronto* is the most lame thing anyone has ever said to him in his life, but he just snorts again. "You got it, officer sir. Pronto. Officer Pronto." He pops the p in the last word, letting the smile ghost over his face. Hopper, in turn, drags a hand over his own features. He's opening his mouth, ready with some start of a good back-and-forth, but Steve is asleep before he can get more than three words out. It sounded like it would have been good, though.

Two hours later he wakes up to the police chief nudging his shoulder lightly. He looks into his eyes and has him follow his finger and checks out his head before he lets him lay back down. His eyes are burning and his chest and shoulder protest when he tries to get comfortable. Dustin has shifted at some point, laying on the ground right beside the couch so that he has room to stretch out. No more than a few minutes pass and he's nearly out again when he hears a door creak open and someone curses in response. Shadows move

down the hall, looming and making Steve's pulse race before a familiar red-framed face peeks around the corner.

Max and Nancy are tip-toeing into the room, arms packed with their things. Neither one looks ashamed or embarrassed when Hopper catches them and he doesn't protest when they drop their pillows and blankets down to join everyone else. He drifts off again to the sound of Nancy hushing Mike and making room for herself beside him despite his tired irritation. Max settles near her, close to Hopper's chair.

Another three hours and this time it's Joyce that wakes him up. She's smiling and her hair is a mess and her eyes are still filled with sleep and everything feels so calm. "Hi." he says stupidly, and raises a hand to wave at her. She gives him a funny sort of look but leans back and steps over to where Hopper has slumped in his chair, mouth open and Steve is pretty sure he's drooling.

There's already a pillow on the floor and Joyce gently tugs the blanket from his chair over his shoulders. She doesn't really wake him up to move him, so much as pull his arm over her shoulder and convince a mostly-asleep Hopper to slump down to the ground so he doesn't crush her under his weight. It's really funny, actually. Steve bites his cheek to keep from laughing at her practically carrying him over and then adjusting his blanket so that he is mostly covered up.

When he pushes himself up to have a look around the kids have all shifted again. El is by Nancy's head with one hand almost on the other girl's cheek, the boys have all somehow become a tangle of limbs and hair and snores. Joyce pulls a jacket over her shoulders and fixes her tangled hair with one hand as they sit there and watch the light start to filter inside from the windows. Steve wonders what time it is. Early. Six in the morning, seven maybe if there's finally a glimpse of light outside. He drops his head back against the couch cushion and closes his eyes and decides he can afford a few more hours of sleep.

Steve has no clue how many hours pass after that and this time when he wakes up it's on his own. It's bright enough outside to make him squint when the light hits his eyes through the window and at some point Joyce and Will decided to join him on the couch. Jonathan is

the one sleeping in the chair now, legs kicked out so that he's nearly kicking Lucas and one hand half holding his head up. They all look ridiculous, crammed into this room and practically making it burst at the seams.

Ridiculous, but nice, Steve decides as he listens to Will mumble something about how 'protection spells aren't for pussies' and watches Nancy shift in her sleep to stretch an arm over her face.

It's the first time Steve really feels at home in the Byers house. Later, as he's helping to bury the thawing Demodog in the yard, Steve will realize that it's not just supernatural experiences that are drawn to the Byers and maybe that's not a bad thing

## 2. Where's the Beef?

Things don't really go back to normal after that.

Steve tries. He really does. He puts everything into his winning smile and devil may care attitude and imagines another universe, another time, where he isn't sleeping with his lights on or lying through his teeth so he isn't arrested (or otherwise silenced) or still avoiding Billy Hargrove or waking up in a cold sweat and scrambling out of bed hearing distant clicking and rumbling or *no one tells me what to do* - it doesn't really fix anything, Nancy taught him that earlier this year, but it helps. He feels better.

He ignores the rumors that swirl when he misses a week of classes, waves off the questions about his still healing injuries, and acts normal. He talks to Nancy and Jonathan when he sees them, he sits down for dinners with his parents when they're in town and smiles and says things like "Of course I'll wash the dishes." and "I'm feeling great." He agrees to go work for his father, for at least a year, even if he doesn't really know anything about corporate law. He counts down the days until graduation and watches everyone weave together college applications or sign themselves away to Hawkins. Steve even keeps driving the munchkins around, taking on the role of Designated Adult while their families are too busy to watch them or Dustin shows up and the rest of the party somehow inevitably follow.

Steve does well - he tells himself he does well - but he still cracks every now and again.

He thinks it happens to all of them, though. It's not a conversation he has with anyone but he sees it in the attentive looks and the way the others never seem to go anywhere alone nowadays. Some days it's obvious, like when Will hardly says a word or Hopper calls around at one in the morning because someone on the other side of town reported a disturbance and *you just can't be too careful these days, Mrs. Wheeler*. And others it's harder to catch, showing itself with Jonathan listening to the same series of songs for three hours without noticing or Dustin asking Steve for a ride and then somehow talking him into spending the entire day together even if he had plans.

No one ever mentions it. Not to him, at least. Steve is fine with that, maybe even just a little relieved at not having to spill his guts at every turn. He figures it's easier, not facing the fucked up things they've all seen and been involved in and done. So he doesn't talk about it, and for a while no one tries to bring it up.

The first time anyone does is after the Snow Ball.

To be honest, he isn't sure how long he's been sitting in the parking lot of the middle school, watching the one flickering light near the side of the building and drumming his fingers on the wheel of his car while he waits. He turns the headlights off and bumps the heat up, sticking his fingers by the vents as he checks the time again. He's not even sure if the dance is over yet. It's very possible Dustin got the time wrong, or maybe he's having more fun than expected and not even thinking about it. Both are very real possibilities. Kids do shit like that, right? He shouldn't be so impatient, he shouldn't have anything to worry himself about. He tells himself these things over and over, thinks about how a watched pot never boils.

It's not like Steve has anywhere else to be or anything else to do or anyone else to *see* - so he doesn't mind sitting and waiting for Dustin, but he does change his mind about the headlights and turn them back on. It's a dull comfort even if it doesn't offer him any real protection. They make the shadows twist away from the front of his car and he imagines it might ward off other, more sinister things at least a little. Like a night-light in a kid's bedroom, keeping the Boogeyman from sticking his hands too far from under the bed.

The thought should be funny, at least a little, but mostly it makes Steve cringe.

In the corner of his vision, somewhere past the window on his passenger side and in the lot, something shifts. The car suddenly seems too loud and he goes still, waits a moment or two before he turns in his seat and leans to look out the window. He does two (2) quick scans of the area and finds nothing, just parked cars and dirt and gravel and the faintly blue-white lighting from the Snow Ball. Nothing else. No people, no creatures going bump in the nights, just cars. He holds his breath regardless, worries his bottom lip with his teeth and keeps a death grip on his steering wheel.

His head starts to pound the longer he sits there, expecting something and getting absolutely nothing. The light on the building flickers again, silently mocks him and plucks at his nerves. He flexes his fingers, lets out the breath he didn't realize he was holding. When nothing mysteriously appears on the passenger side of his car Steve forces himself to try to relax. Still looking into the parking lot, he sends out one hand to blindly grope for the heat to crank it up as high as it goes.

The windows slowly begin to cloud over and in the edges of his sight the defective school light fades out again, whispering to a childish bit of his brain that fears darkness. Steve waits, forcing himself to face forward and ignore how the new dark spot seems to shift and grow and make space for itself in his vision. Forces himself to think about the time before everything else, where a stuttering light would mean nothing more than faulty wiring or a bulb going bad. The time later, maybe, where he can at least ignore it and stop his heart pausing and his stomach twisting.

It's been mostly quiet in Hawkins for the past month or so. He shouldn't have anything to be bothered by. The Gate has been closed, everyone is alive - he wouldn't say okay, necessarily, but alive - and there should be nothing to worry about. They're safe. Should be safe, but Steve can't help the nagging thought in the back of his head that disagrees. The little part of him that murmurs *something is wrong*. Can't help the way he thinks he saw something out there, he knows he hasn't totally lost it yet. Dustin said the dance should be over, he should have at least peaked out the door by now. There was something shifting in the lot and he saw it and maybe it saw Dustin or Will or Lucas or Mike or Nancy -

Steve is very violently snatched out of his thoughts by something knocking rapidly against the window on his left. He recoils and turns so fast that his head protests and spins while one hand slaps down the lock automatically. The immediate rush of panic and adrenaline that floods through his body makes it hard for him to process that the confused face past the glass is familiar. When it finally hits him his cheeks go hot and red, embarrassed at having not even recognized the LTD parked somewhere nearby. Shit, he hadn't even heard another car pull in. He probably looks half mental now, jumping out

of his skin when he *knows* people will be around to pick up their children and siblings.

After a long moment of consideration, Jonathan Byers furrows his brows at him and leans down to knock on the window again to make sure he has his attention. Steve reluctantly unlocks the door, nudges it open and the younger man props it against one of his legs.

"Hi." Steve says, and he feels stupid. A vague nod of acknowledgement is all he gets in response but that's fine, at least he isn't laughing or rolling his eyes.

"How long have you been out here?" Jonathan raises both brows at him giving him a suspicious look, then digs his hands into the pockets of his dark blue jacket and hunches over a bit so that he's nearly drowning in the garment. "The dance isn't even over yet. It's going to at least be twenty minutes."

Steve shrugs, genuinely not sure, and wonders how much gas he's blown. He had dropped Dustin off and seen the defective light and been so caught up on it that he barely sat at his house for twenty minutes before he got a bad feeling and climbed back into his car and ended up sat here. He isn't going to admit that to Jonathan, though. He might understand, might just nod his head and accept it. Or he could give him that signature grimace and tell everyone later that he's gone and lost it.

So instead he asks, "Do you want to sit?" because it's cold and the light on the side of the building still hasn't come back on.

Jonathan wordlessly lets the door shut and stalks around to the other side of the vehicle to slide into the passenger side. Neither of them speak for a few moments, letting the quiet linger around them. And then he's shuffling in his seat, as if trying to physically prepare himself to talk. Steve has to hold back a sigh, tongue against the back of his teeth.

They might not be the best of friends, but he's pretty sure it shouldn't be this awkward or hard to hold a conversation. It's not like they haven't sat together in the caf or waved in the hallways or *fought off a literal monster together*. And yet, here they are. Picking away at the

time in his car while Jonathan fidgets and considers and reconsiders his words, rolling things around nonverbally until he gets things neatly arranged where he wants them to be. Steve wants to tell him to just get on with it or stop making the car shake with how fast he's bouncing his knee.

"Eleven is here." Jonathan breathes out finally, after the minutes have piled up in front of them. He makes it sound like a grave admissions instead of light conversation. "Hopper - the Chief figured everyone needed this." A pause, he shrugs sharply and looks at the roof of the vehicle. "Nancy did her makeup."

It's certainly not what he was expecting. "Okay." Steve isn't sure why this is something he's invested in, a bunch of kids he *should* barely know attending a middle school dance.

"I just," Jonathan starts before he can say anything else. "I wanted to tell you." He sighs harshly and turns to look at the older boy, a full body movement that looks a bit uncomfortable. "We think you should come to dinner tonight." He purses his lips momentarily. "I think you should come to dinner tonight. We're having pasta." He likes pasta, which Dustin knows, and he tells everyone everything so, yeah, it's probably a set up.

"Uh." It's an odd request and the serious, searching look on Jonathan's face is making it his turn to fidget, leaning into his door. "Is this, like, one of those 'if I don't show up you'll come find me' things? You slow down beside me on the street and Nancy leans out with a mask on and drags me inside your Ford and someone knocks me out?"

"No." Jonathan says it so quickly that it sounds like a lie and Steve's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. The other boy's eyes roll in response. "Everyone is going to be there and it would be - you know - nice." Another short pause. "If you were there, I mean. You should be there."

He wants to refuse. He wants to drop Dustin off and go home and retreat into himself for the rest of the night. But there's that look on Jonathan's face, the lingering tightness in his chest and the warmth of the car causing the windows to fog up. Dustin was probably going to try to con him into going inside and hanging around with them all

anyway, which means even if he does decline he's going to be hearing about it all night and receive at least one (1) phone call where Dustin insists that he's missing the time of his life. He can practically feel himself deflating, shoulders drooping as he brings a hand up to rub at the still healing cut on his head.

"Okay." Steve gives a half nod, mostly to himself. "I guess I can try to clear my busy schedule - but it better be the best damn dinner of my entire life, Byers."

The other boy bobs his head a few times, looks like he *might* almost be smiling. "It will be." he says, and Steve expects that to be the end of it. But the door never opens, the cold never stuffs itself between them in the car. He has to admit he's a little surprised. "How is your face?"

"My face is flawless." When Jonathan gives him a flat look, an irritated line between his brows, he tries again. "You can see my face, it's not that dark out here."

"That's not what I meant."

Steve knows that, obviously. That doesn't mean he really wants to talk about how he's healing up from getting his ass brutally handed to him or how he's having nightmares of *It's giving me the heebie-jeebies*, though. He shrugs lightly and leans back in his seat, shoving his fingers by the vents again in an effort to keep them warm. His companion doesn't stop staring though, one brow cocked in a fashion that reminds him of Nancy. He decides she would be proud, wonders if the shared expression is a coincidence or if his is modeled after hers. Probably a little of both. The idea of them rubbing off on each other like that is funny, if a bit weird. Next thing he knows they'll both be listening to The Clash and sipping lightly flavored teas.

Realistically, at the rate they're going they'll *all* be rubbing off on each other. Everyone will be spouting off random facts about amphibians and reptiles and other questionable and slimy creatures, finding a new love for camouflage, listening to bad music, cooking, getting similar haircuts - they're going to be a gang of nerds. Steve isn't really sure when he got initiated into some weird losers' club. Maybe he should look into have some friends that are over fifteen

and not his previous enemies or love interests, but he's pretty damn entrenched in it now and he's sort of cut ties with the people who were his friends before everything.

It's not like they're that bad, anyway. He doesn't actually mind the Party calling him to bug him for rides or crashing through his back door and insisting that it's *his* turn to host movie night, like he's ever attended a movie night with any of them in his life. Nancy is, well, Nancy, which. Kind of says of it all. Jonathan is sort of an outlier, someone he couldn't have imagined sitting in the passenger side of his car like this a year and a half ago. And yet, here they are, with the younger boy perched in the passenger seat like he belongs there or something.

By the time he stops imagining their collective future and looks up Jonathan is still giving him that look, unrelenting. He tries to look contrite. "You didn't listen to anything I just said, did you."

"It's not that I wasn't listening," he starts, lifting his shoulders. Somewhere on the tip of his tongue or in the back of his mind is a good excuse. "I was just-"

"Wait." Jonathan cuts him off, expression going flat and serious as he raises a finger to his lips and tips his head to one side. "Do you hear that?"

Obediently shutting his mouth, Steve mimics the younger boy. When he doesn't hear anything he looks around instead, noticing nothing out of the ordinary other than the still questionably working light on the side of the middle school. "Uh. No? Not a thing."

"It's the sound of the bullshit train making its first stop, right here in Hawkins Indiana." Jonathan wags a finger at him like he's a child, an action he's sure has been mirrored with him and Dustin. It's embarrassing, he feels like a scolded rugrat. "Please carefully find your seats and give a big round of applause for your conductor, Steve Harrington."

Groaning, Steve drops his head back against his seat and screws his eyes to the roof of the car. He refuses to respond, childish and hard headed through and through. Somewhere past the rows of cars a door

at the middle school opens, littering the grass and sidewalk with flakes of gold and blue light. It's a slight relief. Both because the light on the edge of the building seems to have settled for off, and because if people are starting to leave he'll be free of this conversation and the shadows shifting in his peripherals.

"I know we aren't..." Jonathan starts, and he sounds a little guilty. "Close. The closest. But friends don't lie to each other."

Steve almost asks when they became official, but he drags out some self control and just wrinkles his brow at the ceiling. The joke probably would have missed its mark anyway. "I'm not lying?"

"Lying by omission is still lying." He scoffs. "You've barely talked to anyone since-" he cuts himself off this time, pauses for a few seconds, looks away. "You didn't even tell anyone you had to go to the hospital. Dustin was telling everyone you ran away to Michigan to live with your aunt."

The older boy curses and finally looks down at Jonathan, frowning. "I told him I was *busy* for a few days, not running away forever." He throws his hands up in a vaguely frustrated motion. The conversation is giving him a headache. "It was fine - I'm fine."

"I'm so sure." Jonathan shoots back again, sounding more like a Valley Girl than he ever has in his life. It's disgustingly hilarious. Steve has to go to great lengths not to crack a smile. "You look like shit, still."

"Gee, thanks." He drawls. "You really know how to keep up someone's confidence levels, Byers. Make a girl feel special."

As much as he would like to pretend otherwise, the expectant look isn't budging from Jonathan's face. There's something uncomfortable about sitting there, trying to figure out how to duck away from that look in such a finite space. Steve hasn't had very many serious conversations like this, face to face with no buffer. Some with his parents, few and far between. A couple with Nancy, tense and serious or drunk and lung shattering. One with Hopper, half delusion and nursing what felt like the worst hangover of his life. Another, while signing a paper promising to keep quiet.

This sort of thing had never been a problem with Carol and Tommy. As close as they had been - or, as close as he had considered them to be - serious topics and situations were definitely not high on their list of things to explore. More often than not they laughed those things off, or were too busy being caught up in themselves and/or each other to take notice. If neither of those happened, Steve never had much trouble distracting them or convincing them to back down.

It's not that he *doesn't* want to talk about anything, he's not exactly avoiding it at every turn. Just some turns.

A lot a turns, maybe.

He doesn't mean to. It's an automatic thing, he's pretty sure. Probably something his mother passed down to him in his younger years, when his father was always away on business and she didn't have the option of joining him. Steve can remember more than a few nights of late returns and whispered arguments, mentions of *the smell on you, Robert, you could at least try to hide it*. But she waited anyway, patient and filled with a sort of quiet understanding whether he came back on time or three days late. She made everything seem normal.

Across the car just a couple feet and a thousand words away Jonathan is still watching him, just as patient and staring at him so intently that Steve suddenly questions whether or not he's even blinked within the past few minutes. Like a ram fish. He's pretty sure fish don't blink, at least. He heard that somewhere, once. Dustin would know for sure.

"Do fish blink?" The words come spilling out of his mouth abruptly and Steve inwardly shakes his head at his nonexistent verbal filter.

Looking confused and maybe a little put off, Jonathan blinks at him slowly a few times. "No?" A pause, and then, "Maybe? I don't own any fish, Steve. I'm not exactly invested in them. No one is. Fish don't even *do* anything."

"Hey man," Steve frowns lightly. "Don't hate on fish, they didn't do anything to you. They help our uh.. economists."

There's a beat where Jonathan's face twists with contained laughter

and confusion before he rolls his eyes. "Ecosystem."

"What? That's what I said." He waves a hand in the air dismissively. "Same thing, anyway."

"It definitely is not." Jonathan looks like he wants to argue it further, but the door to the dance opens again and provides a distraction. A flock of almost young adults emerge from the light, one of them gesticulating wildly "There's Will-" a pause, he leans forward and squints, "-is that *Dustin*? What happened to his hair?"

"His hair looks great." Steve huffs, lifting his shoulders.

An amused look is aimed his way at that, the younger boy's shoulders shifting with a quiet laugh. "I should have known."

"Yeah *whatever*, Jon." He rolls his eyes, testing out the nickname on his tongue. Not that Jonathan isn't an okay name and all, but it's a mouthful and Steve likes nicknames. He always has. "He looks fucking phenomenal."

The nickname seems to take the other boy by surprise, his brows threatening to hit his hairline for a moment. The moment passes and despite his expression he doesn't mention it, just shrugging and turning his gaze back to the kids wandering very slowly in their direction. They all look genuinely happy, something they've earned time and time again throughout the last year. Even Mike, who spent at least two-thirds of the year being nothing but grouchy and (quite frankly) a little *shit*, is grinning. Lucas' shirt has somehow found itself fully buttoned to his neck now and his shirt is half not tucked in, El is trying very determinedly to drag Mike to Jonathan's car, Max has ditched the clip that was in her hair and is currently fussing with the braid on her left side, and Will's tie is the most crooked thing Steve has ever seen. Dustin is trailing just behind them, hands in his pockets as he shuffles along.

Steve pops open his door, inviting the cold into the car as he stands and leans with his elbow on the driver's side door. He whistles once, long and loud, and watches two of the six look over to him in surprise. "Alright you little shitheads, it's *cold* and you're *late* so hurry up or this banana is going to split."

He probably wouldn't really leave them, but watching them scramble over to the car in a jumble of limbs and curses of *you said we were on time, Lucas and fuck you, I just checked the time* is pretty satisfying.

"It's Lucas' fault." Mike chips in before they've even made it to the car. The aforementioned boy shoves his shoulder and makes a noise of distaste. "Well it is, we put you in charge of keeping track of the time. It was one job."

"I told you," Lucas snaps as he comes to a stop by Steve's door, "I just checked the time! It was eight fifty-five, Mike. I know how to read a clock. Jesus!"

Behind him, El nods. "Eight fifty-five."

"You're not late." Jonathan pipes up finally, and Steve tries to shoot him a frown. "We were early."

Lucas shoves a finger in Mike's face, looking more accomplished than ever. "See! I *told* you, asshole."

There's a minute or so where the mindless bickering continues before Dustin squeezes himself past Jonathan to make himself at home in the front passenger side. This earns him a dirty look from Lucas, who was probably going to try to call shotgun again.

All of the kids make an attempt to fit themselves into Steve's car until he informs them that, *no*, that is not happening, there are only three seats in the back of his car. Will opts for riding with his brother and mother and Nancy, who is actually running behind. El goes with the Chief, because he isn't going to let her ride with anyone else and he refuses to be part of the babysitting carpool. Which leaves Lucas, Max, and Mike (in that order) cramming themselves into the backseat and chattering excitedly. It's reminiscent of the night he drove them back from the gaping hole in the ground, except no one is covered in dirt and his face isn't tacky with drying blood and his vision isn't doubled or tripled. So, it's like that. But nicer. Considerably less awful.

As expected, the kids are reliving their night in the backseat within seconds. Half with each other and half with him.

"I thought Troy was going to piss himself again." Mike remarks, as if this is totally normal. "And the look on James' face when he saw her - totally worth *every* shitty thing they've done since kindergarten."

"Did you see Greg McCorkle fall on his face?" Max snorts to herself. "I've never seen a worse dancer in my life."

"As if any of us are any better." Dustin comments from the front, fiddling with the radio. He puffs out his cheeks when he can't find anything he likes, flopped back and rolling his eyes to the sky.

"I don't know about any of *you*, but I can dance." The assertion comes from Lucas this time as he does a wave with his arms in the backseat, nearly hitting Max in the eye until she swats his arm away.

"You know," the redhead interrupts easily. "Just because you *can* dance doesn't mean you *should* or that you're *good* at it."

The banter continues like that for the duration of the car ride, with Dustin loosening up part of the way there and talking about how an older girl danced with him and he thought Jessica was going to blow her top and, yeah, Troy and James' faces were definitely something that should have been caught on camera. Which leads into them retelling that story to Max, complete with lots of hand gestures and Dustin pretending to hold a knife to his own face and Mike imitating his momentarily levitation.

It's very likely that nothing in his life is ever going to just be normal again, if this night has been any indication.

Only five minutes into the drive Mike is leaning to the front to harass him. "Why do you always drive so slow?"

"There's something called a speed limit, you can't just do whatever the hell you want." Steve shoots him a dirty look. "There's this thing called the *law*. You're supposed to follow it."

"I've never seen anyone follow the speed limit on this road." Max points out and Steve hates her, just a little bit.

"Just because the people who normally drive you around are maniacs who want to spend their nights in the Police Station does not mean

that *I* want to do that. The Chief is literally driving around here right now."

Dustin scoffs reaching over to adjust the heat, far too comfortable in his car. "Hopper wouldn't *arrest* us."

Steve is pretty sure that's the opposite of true. He would probably pull him over just for a laugh or out of spite. "I should put you all out and make you walk."

"But you won't." Lucas sounds so confident that Steve is *really* tempted to pull over and make them get out and walk beside the car for a few minutes. Or the rest of the way.

He doesn't end up doing that. He *does* slow down and make the kids groan and whine for the next twenty-five minutes while he takes his sweet time getting to the Byers. It's a bit of self inflicted torture, listening to the termites wail about how he's being terrible and they're absolutely starving and dinner is going to start without them and this is practically abuse. It's also hilarious, so. There's that.

By the time they actually get there all of the kids have given up and slumped themselves dramatically in their seats like it's some kind of silent protest. Steve really wishes he had a picture of them, spirits broken and all because it's a sight he is never going to see again. The light returns to their eyes almost as soon as the car comes to a stop, of course. All of them race out of the car, crashing into each other in haste. As if they thought maybe he was going to lock them all in and force them to keep driving forever.

Dustin leans back down to look at him through his still open door, eyes searching his expression as his mouth opens. "Will's mom made pasta," is the only invitation he gives him, voice hopeful. "Joyce makes great rolls, too."

"Save it." Steve sighs, reaching for the key to his car and turning it until the car shuts off.

The younger boy is already grinning at him, mouth as wide as his whole big head. Without waiting for more, he lets his door shut and follows his friends toward the front door. Unsurprisingly, everyone

else has made it there before them. Steve pulls himself from the car to join the rest of them where Mike is opening the door and shooting him a dirty look, muttering something about how it's *unfair* and *everyone beat us here, Jesus*. It's easy enough to ignore, he's probably said worse to him within the past few months.

"You're *late*." As soon as he steps inside Steve finds himself faced with sharp brown eyes and a frown.

"He drives slow as *shit*." Mike hisses as he goes by. "He *sucks*."

Throwing the brunette a stern look, Steve tries to land a clean hit on the back of his head - just a light bop. "Language, Wheeler, I am not going to have your mom blaming me for your dirty mouth."

Mike rolls his eyes overdramatically. "You suck."

"He doesn't suck!" Steve doesn't really need Dustin jumping to his defense but here he is, anyway. "Steve is just a *little* slow, he's trying."

Groaning, the subject of conversation tries to shoo them toward the kitchen. "Oh my *God* shut up, both of you."

Spoiler alert: they do not shut up.

The boys continue to chatter and find a source of comedy through him, personally. If they weren't a bunch of kids he might feel a little threatened. Steve gets dragged to a spot between Dustin and Joyce, who gives him a hug when she sees him and demands that he make himself at home. Jonathan and Will are on her other side. On the other side is Hopper, Eleven, Mike, and then Nancy and Max. Lucas makes himself comfortable at one end of the table, cheekily taking up as much elbow room as possible to mess with Max and Will.

It's a little cramped, the younger boy keeps elbowing Steve in the side as he continues to argue with Mike about whether or not he's *totally* useless or just sometimes useless. The rest of the kids are leaning around them to entertain some kind of conversation about jackets, he's pretty sure they're talking about jackets. Nancy helps Joyce dish out food across the table, forcing everyone to take actual vegetables on their plate with their pasta and bread. Jonathan is watching her,

the same way Steve is sure he has before, making light conversation and watching her laugh and roll her eyes.

Nancy stops by him next, dumping more broccoli onto his plate than he is ever going to be able to reasonably eat. He's pretty sure it's more than anyone else at the table can reasonably eat. This heaping pile of miniature trees is going to overrun his entire plate. He's been betrayed. "I'm glad you came."

She rests a hand on his shoulder for a moment, eyes soft as she looks down at him, and then she has her hand in Dustin's hair and she's giving him the *smallest* portion of greens of them all. He could kill her, honestly. Steve feels a little better when Jonathan and Will also end up with decent heaps of broccoli on their plates, like maybe life is a little more fair now. Will looks positively disgusted, poking at his reluctantly. Steve uses his fork to fling some of his onto his neighbor's plate while he's still engrossed in conversation.

Max seems to catch him in the act, lips twitching up on one side as he relocates another piece of greenery onto Dustin's plate. This leads to her abandoning some of hers on Lucas' plate, not nearly as ninja-like as Steve. He's very disappointed in her, clearly she needs more practice. Lucas catches on quickly, turning to intercept her fork with his and mocking a sword fight with their cutlery.

In front of him Eleven grins and nudges Mike, saying something that he can't quite make out across the table. The younger boy snaps his gaze over to him and then back to her and grimaces, shrugs, shoves the largest piece of broccoli he can find in his mouth. He... Well, he certainly doesn't seem like he's enjoying it but Steve isn't going to stop him from eating healthy. He isn't going to stop pawing off his vegetables on Dustin either, so.

"It's good." Mike squeezes out once his mouth is clear of food. "Steve just has bad taste."

Steve flicks another piece of broccoli onto Dustin's plate and shoots him a bored look. "I didn't know you liked broccoli so much, maybe we should give you more?"

Nancy pauses at Hopper's plate, looking into her bowl thoughtfully

before moving back around to Mike. The older man looks relieved, poking around his three (3) pieces of broccoli as Nancy proceeds to dump the rest onto her younger brother's plate. He swats at her and she gives him a sweet smile before stepping away.

"Wow, Nancy." Mike deadpans, looking at his plate and then up at her. "Thanks. Really. I appreciate you loving me enough to do this to me."

Beside him, Eleven bites into her own food and her mouth twists. "Mike." She starts, giving him an almost offended look. "I don't know why you like this."

When she tries to get rid of her own portion, neither of her neighbors are having it. Hopper gives her this stern look and she rolls her eyes but turns away regardless. Mike just whines until she stops, rolling her eyes again as he insists he loves vegetables and she should too and he can't eat all of them by himself anyway. Steve has no sympathy for either of them, snorting to himself at their joint dilemma.

Sitting at the table like this, surrounded by them in this house, things seem easy.

It's not comfortable the whole time, like when Nance asks him how his aunt is and everyone at the table knows he's talking out of his ass, or when Joyce looks at him so kindly and he's forced to remember every bad impulsive thing he said about the Byers in that alley. But it's something. Steve struggles to describe it, wonders how this house became the hub for their mismatched Party and all of these *things*. He thinks it was probably an unconscious decision, and maybe the Wheelers would have won out if they had a Joyce Byers and not a Ted Wheeler. But hey, what does he know? His house is empty the majority of the time.

At the end of the night he and the Chief are volunteered to get the kids ready to leave. It's a real task, where a couple of them grind their teeth and Steve thinks Mike might throw a tantrum. "This is stupid. It's not fair and you *know* it. I can't believe you're doing this to us."

The kid says it like this is some kind of sick joke being played on him specifically. He's being dramatic, but pointing it out would only make it worse so instead Steve says "We're already an hour past your curfew."

"You don't get it!" He wails, stomping his feet like a child as he makes his way out the front door. El follows him dutifully. He's probably gone to sulk in Jonathan's car, since he'll be the one taking the Wheeler duo home.

Dragging one large hand down his face, Hopper heaves a familiar sigh. "I hate young love."

Steve looks over his shoulder, catches sight of Nancy trying to corral Lucas and Dustin to his car. Something in his chest tightens and when he looks back the older man is searching his expression. "Me too."

The police chief heaves another sigh, as if just standing there is a huge weight on his shoulders and he can barely handle it. He looks like he's going to say something, only to be rather rudely bowled over by a short redhead with a massive scowl plastered to her face. Giving Steve the nastiest look he has ever recieved in his entire life, probably, she proceeds to shove by him too. Hopper looks almost distressed, looking out the front door to see Max joining the group and waving one hand about while her hair wildly whips around her face with the all of the gesturing. The other girl in the group seems to nod a bit, agreeing, and Mike barks out something either funny or offensive. Maybe both.

"I have to drive with two of them." Hopper finally breathes a minute or so later, hunching his shoulders and taking out a pack of cigarettes as he walks out the door. He watches Steve follow as he lights one, pushes smoke out through his nose. He snorts out, "I might go missing next."

Steve thinks it might be just a little soon, still, for a joke like that but he chokes on a laugh. "Max is pretty scary, I wouldn't put it past her."

Speaking of, the irritated girl turns to face them again making a rolling gesture with one hand in the air. "You wanted to go? *Let's go.*"

She stomps over to his Blazer, pulling open one of the doors and climbing in. She's followed shortly after by El, who looks less angry but still perfectly capable of murdering them both. Steve feels kind of bad for him, having to drive around and trust both of them not to be a total pain in the ass and/or distraction. The older man gives another well practiced sigh and disappears for a few moments, probably to tell Joyce goodbye, before he returns and stomps out his cigarette and give a quick "Be safe, kid." before his Chevrolet is rolling out of the area.

Taking this as his cue to leave, Steve steps over to his car. Nancy is finally shutting the door on Lucas and Dustin, who have immersed themselves in something apparently very secret. She looks at him as he approaches, blue eyes swimming with something on the edge of pity. He stalls for a moment, tries to ignore the sneaking worry that maybe that's why he was invited tonight. The moment passes when she hands him his key, leaning in to hug him before he can escape. It's nice, it's easy, and he rests his chin on her head as he returns the gesture.

It's only a second or two, and when she pulls away Steve ignores the look she gives him this time. "If you ever need anything," she pauses and purses her lips. "I'm still here for you, Steve."

"I know, Nance." He runs a hand through his hair and lets it rest on the back of his neck. "I'm fine - don't give me that look."

"You look-"

"-like shit?" Steve cuts her off with both brows raised and she flushes momentarily, has the decency to look at least a little embarrassed. "I've heard."

She gives him an unamused look. "People are worried about you, it's not a bad thing. You don't have to act like we're being assholes or something."

"I'm not trying to." Steve frowns, feels a little bad at that. But he's already had this conversation today and he's just not up for it again. "I get it. Just - not tonight, Nance."

She cuts him a hard look, expression tight, but he's saved by Jonathan coming out the front door and taking her attention for a minute. Steve latches onto the distraction without hesitation.

"Jonathan! Jon! Jon Boy!" Steve welcomes him over with a waving arm and receives another patented Nancy Wheeler eyebrow raise. Jonathan just looks confused and a little amused, but he joins them anyway.

"What have I missed?"

Nancy looks between them for a moment and then smiles. "Steve was just telling us about how he's coming to movie night."

Steve draws a blank. "I was?"

"He was?" Jonathan looks just as surprised.

"Yes, he was." She nods once and steps toward Jonathan's car before he can object. "See you *Monday*, Steve."

"Uh, yeah, okay." He responds lamely. Jonathan claps him on the shoulder as Steve climbs into his car and he sends them a wave as they convince Mike to go without another fight.

Dustin and Lucas are done with their secretive whispering now, opting instead for loudly complaining about their wait. He does a very good job of ignoring them, tuning out their mild complaints as he starts the car and backs out of the drive to head out.

"It's cold."

"We're freezing." Lucas agrees wholeheartedly.

"My mom is going to flip if I get hypothermia."

Dustin mocks a shiver. "I can barely feel my toes."

"It's been like thirty whole minutes."

"We could have waited inside, where it's warm. But no, instead we sit here - freezing - like cats in boxes on the side of the road."

"I had a cat once," Dustin muses. "We never put him outside in the cold."

Steve waits until they're a few minutes down the road to entertain them. "You make it sound like I've ditched you in the middle of the street. You had to sit in the car for two minutes, shithheads. And the heat is on *high*, there is no way you're freezing."

"What if we already have frostbite?"

"You're really slacking with your whole caretaker role in this Party, Steve." Dustin gives him an unbelievably disappointed look through the rear view mirror. "We're suffering from major injuries now - who is going to hold this party together when a third of us are incapacitated."

"You don't-" Steve groans and rubs the bridge of his nose as he watches the road. "You're not injured, man, there's no way you're even slightly cold at this point."

Steve dutifully goes back to trying to ignore them. It's for the best anyway, because his head is foggy and he's tired and he isn't really *supposed* to be driving this late but here he is. So he turns on the radio and listens to *Raise A Little Hell* just a little louder than necessary just to bother them. After a few minutes of Lucas petulantly kicking his seat and both of them singing along incredibly obnoxiously, they seem to wear down and the younger boys settle again.

The drive is quieter from there, after Steve knocks the radio back a couple notches. He watches the houses as he turns toward Elm Street, sideeyes the darkened windows and dimmed lights. There are only a few where the lights on still are, shadows drifting behind drawn curtains as they welcome the night.

The Sinclair house is dark when they arrive. When he gets out in an effort to walk Lucas to the door, the younger boy vehemently insists that he can walk just fine on his own and he doesn't need a babysitter. So he opts for leaning on the side of his car instead, babysitting from a distance. Mrs. Sinclair doesn't look very pleased with either of them, but she seems to take his chagrined look as an

apology. She even returns his wave before shutting the door and leading her son in by the shoulder.

Dustin is elbowing his way to the front passenger seat when he gets back in the car, head bumping the roof as he scrambles over the middle and buckles himself in again. He's mussed up his hair in his efforts, but he looks pretty satisfied so Steve doesn't mention it.

Much like the drive to the Sinclairs, the trip down the road some number of streets is fairly quiet. Dustin occupies himself with changing the radio station ever few minutes and snooping through the contents of his car with the occasional comment on how he needs to clean it or find homes for some of his personal possessions. Both of those things are probably true. Cleaning his car out and moving his things around sounds like a few hours that he could invest in something better. Like sleeping.

Unlike the last house, it looks like all the light in the Henderson house are still on. It looks warm even from a distance.

"Mom made cookies earlier." Dustin starts as the car clicks off. "Sugar cookies."

Those are his favorite, obviously, but Steve isn't going to fall for this trick twice in one night. "You know what time it is, right?"

He shrugs as they get out of the car, but chooses not to push the issue. "Have you Tews yet? He's a Siamese."

Steve is about to inform Dustin that he doesn't really like cats, they're kind of assholes, when the door flies open in front of them. The other boy's mom greets them both with a smile and open arms. Judging by her demeanor she either doesn't care or didn't notice just how late they are. He'll take it as a win regardless.

Ms. Henderson wraps her arms around both of them, enthusiastically inquiring about their nights and dragging them both over the threshold before he can object. "I hope Dusty didn't make you wait too long." She nudges both of the boys toward the living room and the couch. "We have cookies."

Looking very much like he's won this this round, Dustin flops onto the middle cushion and sends him the widest grin he has ever seen. There's some drama on the television, featuring what looks like a lot of doctors. The man currently on the screen is vaguely familiar. David... Something. Harbor? Barbour? Dark curly hair, dark eyes, and Steve is pretty damn sure he's telling his coworker that he has a sexually transmitted disease. His voice is familiar, too. Not being able to pick out who it is is a little frustrating.

The plump older woman returns to the room with an entire *plate* of cookies, dusted with sugar, and two glasses of milk. "I heard these are your favorite."

She nods to Dustin, placing the plate on the table and eying the older boy expectantly when he doesn't sit. Behind her there's a blonde woman on the TV rambling about a missing patient, eyes frantic and words clipped. And then back to the familiar doctor, admitting he doesn't even know who else he's supposed to be relaying his important information to.

"Birney." Steve spits out abruptly. Ms. Henderson squints at him. "The actor -" He gestures loosely to the television, she turns to look at it in confusion. "David Birney."

"Oh!" She looks delighted when she connects the dots, maneuvering him by the shoulder to sit on the couch. "It's *St. Elsewhere*. This is old - but the best place to start is the beginning. That's Ben Samuels." She says this as if he should know something about him. "You'll like him more later, he really shines with his patients."

As much as Steve appreciates her attempts to influence his taste with medical dramas, he's not sure he's actually going to invest himself in this show. "Ms. Henderson, it's late and uh, I wouldn't want to overstay my welcome or impose."

"Nonsense." She's already heading toward the hallway, waving off his words. "Help yourself to anything."

There's a moment of quiet aside from the television where Steve decides she was either tired and wanted to get rid of them or she is mad about them being late and abandoning him with Dustin is some

form of torture. The boy seated to his right shoves one cookie into his mouth and the other into his hand, snagging the remote from the corner of the coffee table and flipping through the channels.

"You weren't really going to watch that, were you." It doesn't sound like a question, but big brown eyes turn on him anyway. "*Night Flight* should still be on."

Steve begrudgingly takes a bite from his cookie, drinks some of his milk, and shrugs. "Put on whatever you want, *Dusty*."

He earns himself a swift smack in the arm for that one. "I can end this sleepover, *Steven*. This is my house."

"When did I agree to a - a slumber party?" Steve asks around his cookie, trying not to choke on a laugh. "Are we going to play board games and sing along to Cyndi Lauper?"

"Well maybe not Cyndi Lauper but we could, if that's what you really like." He's popping another cookie in his mouth, depositing the clicker on the couch cushion between them. "We have *Boggle*. And *Monopoly*. *Sorry!*, too."

It's not really what Steve had in mind to end the night. Then again, his whole night up until this point has been pretty unplanned. "One game." He concedes when Dustin continues to stare over at him. "And then I'm going."

"You are so on."

One game turns into two, and a second glass of milk. Dustin royally whoops his ass in the first round, telling him that it's out of pure skill. The second Steve manages to save, by the skin of his teeth. Two games turns into three, where he loses again, which turns into watching some late night drama on the television. He tries very hard to stay awake, adamant about leaving at some point in the night thinking *there's a bed at my house and I want to sleep in it*. But he was tired when he was sitting at the school hours ago and he's had warm milk and cookies so.

It's not a real shocker when his body crashes on him and he forces

himself to give up on actually getting off of his ass and going home.

### 3. That's So Bogue

January 11, 1985

The weeks following that are uneventful, passing in almost a haze. The days collide with the nights and conversations blur together. Steve falls into a weird routine, attending the same miniature events every day and letting himself get pulled into what almost feels like Hawkins again.

Day by day, life moves on. They try to move on.

It's a Friday and that means moving on looks like Lisa and Debra Mancel's kitchen and tastes like whiskey and some kind of orange soda. There's at least two parties like this almost every Friday, welcoming the irresponsible young adults of the area with open arms and pulling them in. Steve almost always finds himself there - or hosting one himself, though he avoids the backyard lit with dim blue lights that whisper of Somewhere Else - immersing himself in the burn of alcohol and the loud music. He has to scan the crowds before getting too invested, sidestepping potential trouble as well as he can. It's normal, familiar. It's like he has a schedule.

Just like every Monday, where he finds himself crammed onto Nancy or Jonathan's couch, watching movies and conversing until they all start to slump and have to admit they need to sleep to get through the school day tomorrow. Or Tuesdays, where he's brought basketball practice and bruises. Wednesdays bring the task of escorting a gaggle of thirteen year old kids to the Palace, followed by AV Club and another basketball practice on Thursdays. Saturdays come with a non-mandatory practice, which seems *pretty* mandatory when the coach screams his face red about how they need to step it up, and then driving the twerps to D&D night. Sundays are quiet, spent trying to catch up on missed sleep or waiting to see if his parents return home from wherever their business has taken them.

But Fridays are where Hawkins seems to thrive.

Steve finds it easy to forget the things shifting on the other side of the ground beneath their feet, drifts and gets lost in the crowd of his

classmates while he muffles his anxieties with familiar music. It (he) feels normal. He feels like Steve Harrington, King of Hawkins High - except that he's not, anymore. He knows that. It's not that there's anything too obviously exciting to rule over here, so it's not a huge loss and he doesn't *miss* it, exactly, but. It was still his life, and detaching himself from a title he wore so comfortably for years is a little more complicated than he would have originally suspected.

Outside someone whoops loudly, breaking his train of thought. They must be having some kind of contest out there, because he can hear more people yelling now and chanting before it breaks off into cheering. Probably trying to see who can chug their Bartles and Jaymes the fastest, or maybe doing keg stands. Someone screams, loud and high and followed by laughter. The sound spikes something worried into the pit of his stomach, encourages him to drink his drink faster.

Exiting the kitchen, Steve finds himself wandering past a table set up for beer pong and maneuvering his way into the kitchen. Over on the couch he can just make out Tommy and Carol. She has her legs over his lap, leaned against the armrest while he crows something about *the sickest shit I've seen, swear on my life* and inches his fingers through her belt loops. They look happy, as happy as they've ever been, still just as connected at the groin as they were when they started dating on-and-off when they were thirteen. They had been a weird constant in his life for years. Before November of '83.

He thinks of when they met in the third grade, Tommy's parents babysitting while his own were out of town. And in the fifth grade, when Carol moved into town and Tommy tormented her endless for years because she was *new and has girl-germs, yikes* and he didn't like it. Then in the eight grade, when Steve got into his first fight and the other boy shoved through him and broke Bryce Dern's nose and chipped his front tooth because Tommy has always been a bit bigger and better built than Steve is. There was a time when he learned how to fight from Tommy, after Bryce Dern came back and broke his nose in retaliation. Running from fights and cops with him.

He remembers the three of them seeing movies and visiting the pool and driving to the late - the couple's first date and coaching Carol through her first kiss and the first time they broke up. And the

second, the third, the sixth - and watching them get back together every time like it was fate.

Watching them now, from a distance, is a little weird. Almost wrong.

Steve tells himself he's not bitter. He's not bitter about the way they whisper conspiratorially to each other. He's not bitter about the way they get to strut through Hawkins together, a would-be power couple if either of them made more impact. He's not bitter about the way they make their own universe in the middle of a party in the middle of a shitstorm. He's *definitely* not bitter about the fact that a year or two ago he would have been there with them, sprawled on the opposite end of the couch with some girl, some distraction, settled beside him while they all played on inside jokes and bumped elbows and reminisced on nights before spent partying or generally having a good time.

He's not *fucking* bitter about it.

And he's still not bitter when he spots Billy Hargrove, all sharp smile and thick lines tucked into a plethora of ugly jackets, sauntering over to the couch. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his just-this-side-of-too-tight jeans and kicks at Carol's legs until she grumbles and retracts them to make room for his big head and oversized ego. And then he sits with one arm raised over the back of the couch, knees spread, body language reading similar to that of a big cat waiting for its prey to show its head. Steve wonders if, tonight, that will be him or just some freshman or junior unlucky enough to cross his path.

The answer comes when Billy scans the room and catches him staring like an idiot. His lip curls but he doesn't move and he doesn't break his gaze, initiating a staring contest from across the room. His complete lack of embarrassment or shame is quite honestly unnerving. It's like he's expecting someone to be watching him and he's just waiting to catch them, waiting to step up to some unspoken challenge and puff out his chest like the ideal alpha male he probably assumes he is. Steve looks away first, because he knows it's the inevitable outcome and he isn't interested and playing this game tonight.

Still, when he tips his head back to down the rest of his drink and

retreats to the kitchen he can feel the other young man's eyes burning a hole in his back.

It's quieter in the kitchen, anyway. Another upside comes in the form of the Mancel sisters trying to outdo each other while chugging cheap wine coolers. They're drunk enough to be making a mess, losing approximately half of their drinks down their chests when they lift their chins and try to drink more. They end up looking more like they've had a wet t-shirt contest than a chugging contest. It's funny, but Steve feels a wave of secondhand embarrassment and is momentarily glad he's never been quite that sloppy. Looking away, he ducks his head toward the cooler settled beside the fridge and digs for a beer.

"Well, well, well." The voice makes him jump, nearly smacking his head into the open lid of the cooler as he grabs the nearest drink and stands straight. "If it isn't Steve Harrington, leaving his house for the first time since, what, December? We thought you were becoming a shut-in. Or socially incompetent, you know, from the head trauma - but *my* money was on a shut-in."

Steve thinks he should be less surprised to find a mullet-sporting blonde looking at him from the doorway. He drags a hand through his hair. "Fuck off, Hargrove. Just because I don't want to see your ugly mug every Friday doesn't mean I'm secluding myself. There are other parties in Hawkins."

There's a moment where Billy tips his head to the side and furrows his brows like he's confused, probably caught off guard by his use of *secluding*. Jonathan taught him that one, he's not ashamed to say he's pretty damn proud of it. The moment passes, though, with a snort and a shake of his head.

"No need to be so hostile, man." And Billy smiles, the picture of friendly if not for the way he crosses his arms and tips his head even further. "I'm just *worried* about you, going all little bitch. We go spend all this time *bonding* and shit and you just up and start avoiding me. It's a *real* bummer."

Making no effort to deny the accusation, the burnette pops the tab on his beverage and sips it lightly. The slight buzz makes the

conversation just a bit more bearable, loosens his tongue enough for him to engage in some sort of back-and-forth without the scar on the side of his head aching. Steve thinks over his words and watches Billy watching him and eventually rolls his eyes.

"Why are you even here, Billy?"

Blinking at Steve like it's the dumbest question he's ever heard, the other boy adjusts the collar of his tacky yellow shirt and squints at him. "It's a graduation party. I'm graduating. You're graduating. Do the math."

"It's not a graduation party."

"Yes it is."

"No, it's not."

"Yes it is."

"It's not."

"It is Harrington, ask Loose Lisa over there." He jabs a thumb at the Mancels, who are currently trying to climb onto the kitchen table for their rendition of Donna Summer's *Hot Stuff*. Steve grimaces. "She says it's a graduation party. Her house, her rules."

"We don't graduate until May-" Steve pinches the bridge of his nose and holds back a groan as he realizes they sound like literal toddlers, arguing over anything. "Whatever. It's a graduation party. I don't care. I meant why are you *in here* as in, in the kitchen, where I am, trying to crawl up my ass?"

Again, Billy offers him a victorious grin and nods toward the cooler just a step behind him. "The alcohol is in here, genius."

He... doesn't really have a snappy line or tight argument for that. Steve looks between the other senior and the beer cooler and shuffles his feet before taking a couple steps to the side. He's careful to stay at least arm's length from Billy, watching him from the corner of his eye and trying to sip his beer and ignore him. He should leave, admit defeat and back out of the kitchen and find his way home but he

doesn't. It's like he's rooted to this spot. He just stands there, trying very hard to ignore the way every shuffle of Billy's limbs makes his shoulders stiffen.

When he snaps the cap off of his drink it makes Steve jump a little, and when he glances over there's a shit eating grin on his face and he can see the outline of a bruise around his shoulder. As if he can feel the look, Billy shifts his jacket back into place and takes a long drink. Steve was hoping he would leave, but the longer he stands there and tries to ignore him the more obvious it is that he's not going anywhere. In fact, he's blatantly staring at him now and just grinning, hoping for an outburst or reaction that the slightly taller boy is refusing to give him.

Deflating a little bit, Steve sighs again. He feels about as tired as Hopper always sounds. "What is it *now*?"

Billy takes his time, takes a drink, lights up a cigarette even though they *shouldn't* be smoking in here. The owners (do they count as the owners, when their parents are absent?) of the house don't seem to mind, too caught up in inviting a few of their friends onto the table. It seems flimsy. It really can't be safe. He wants to tell them to get down, before one of them busts their ass and it turns into a sobfest but. But he's a little preoccupied, with the current situation and shoving his beer into his face to mask his discomfort.

"You look like the dead." He says, finally, and the words sound so casual and offhanded that it doesn't really fit. But Billy isn't really subtle, so he isn't sure what he expected. Like it makes a difference, he adds: "It's no *fun*."

"Gee. Thanks. I'll have to work on that."

And then Billy is pushing toward him so that he has to take one step toward the exit just to keep a respectable distance from him. *It's not supposed to be fun*, he thinks. *You're no fun. You broke most of my face once, remember? We're not friends.* He isn't really sure Billy has any friends. *Now that's not a shocker.* People, for some undiscernable reason, like Billy. There's some sort of charm he kicks on and then he draws them in like a black hole and devours every bit of light - but he doesn't really seem like he wants friends. Distractions,

entertainment, but not friends.

Steve doesn't ask him to continue but he does. "The whole braindead, zombie thing?" Billy looks at him like he *almost* doesn't want to find it funny - like he *almost* isn't enjoying getting into his head. "It's giving me the heebie-jeebies." The words twist in his stomach and settle into a dull hiss at the back of his ears.

"*Fuck* you, Hargrove." He spits, and takes a step around him.

Billy barks out a laugh, sounding nasty and smug and looking like he *knows* what that phrase does to him, knows it bites at him when he's nervous, like he knows there's something lurking in the shadows outside the windows. "There it is - a little *fucking* life in you."

For a moment it's as if they're back in the Byers' home, with television static in the background and the excited yelling of almost-adults is the distressed screaming of early-teens. Steve feels like he's in the middle of a game he never got the instructions or rules to, like they're bouncing back and forth and he isn't sure where the goal is.

It's dangerous, and sort of thrilling in a way, distraction that pulls him away from the time between supernatural disasters. It's something entirely different from standing in the Byers' living room with a bat and a Demogorgan towering over his form. Different from the Demodogs racing through the trees and the junkyard and the tunnels underneath Hawkins. He should leave - he *knows* he should leave - but he must have lost his better judgement somewhere along the line.

Maybe when he was younger, and he let himself become such an asshole. Or when he didn't stop Tommy and Carol from spraypainting nasty things wherever they could. Or when he said what he said about all of them. It could be that he lost it after that first fight with the Demogorgan. There's also a fair chance he left it with Nancy, too.

If he were in a movie, this is where he would say something quick witted and sassy. A good one liner to segway into an important or suspenseful scene. But life isn't a movie, and Steve can't think of anything smart enough to say and if he stand there much longer he's just going to look weird and get laughed at or lose his nerve. So he

looks at his beer, looks at Billy, and washes back the rest of his drink.

Steve deposits his empty can on the counter and shoves forward, crowding into the other boy's space in the same way he's done to him so many times before. Billy looks, for the first time since he's met him, totally caught off guard. His eyebrows rise and his gaze shifts over Steve's features, as if he's trying to judge the next move. The moment passes as quickly as it came, and Billy crows out a laugh and grins wide enough that his cheeks look like they could split. He puts the fingertips of one hand on his shoulder and pushes back, smoke rolling from his nose.

"*That's* what I'm talking about, bonebag."

"At least I'm not a - a-" Steve struggles, scowls. "*Hoser.*"

It's a lame insult. Steve knows that. Judging by the look on Billy's face, he also knows. Which makes this all just a little embarrassing, and he feels pretty stupid but. Whatever. It gets the desired effect of Billy shoving back at one of his shoulders. The Californian puts his cigarette out of the counter, which finally prompts a protest from Lisa across the kitchen with a livid '*Hello!*' that couldn't possibly sound more offended.

Billy blows the smoke in his face and Steve isn't sure who throws the first punch, but his lip is bleeding and his hips hit the counter and he feels his own knuckles connecting with something sharp. A shoulder? A cheekbone? It's hard to tell. He scrambles, gets one hand grounded on the counter while his feet momentarily scramble for purchase. He kicks at Billy's shin and received an irritated huff and the heel of a hand to the bottom of his jaw in response. The brunette shoves Billy off, forces him back toward the kitchen table and swings hard enough with his dominant hand that his knuckles fucking *crack* against the side of his head.

And then Billy is hollering his excitement, wiping spit from the corner of his mouth and grabbing Steve by the front of his shirt to jerk him around. He spins, knocking his legs into the alcohol cooler (it spills ice and water and unopened beers on the floor, someone curses) before tossing him back against the kitchen table. The girls previously standing atop of it are yelling now, something along the

lines of *what the fuck* and *holy shit you can't do that in here* but Steve is too busy elbowing Billy in the nose to focus on that. Too busy trying - and failing - to dodge the fist that hits him in his left temple.

Everything swims, for just a moment, and Steve feels absolutely *high* on it. It's a feeling he can recall from his first fight, from Dern breaking his nose, from fighting Jonathan and the Demogorgan and the Demodogs. He wonders if this is what Billy does it for. This minuscule rush that temporarily overtakes the ache and panic in his skull. And then he's on the floor, reeling and wheezing and reaching out without thinking to snatch at the other boy's ankle. It puts him on the floor, which. Okay. It could have been planned better, but now he doesn't have to worry about being kicked in the teeth and needing to visit a dentist.

He can hear someone yelling. Probably one of the Mancels, if the distressed pitch of their voice is any hint. "You *cannot* break anything! Jesus!"

Looking a little dazed, Billy blinks at him from a couple feet away. There's a beat, and then he's grunting and hauling himself close enough to knock Steve's head into the table leg. It's not nearly as rough as it could be, but his vision floats for a second anyway and he barely registers the knuckles against his teeth. Without looking he kicks, feels his knee connect with what is probably his ribs, maybe his side.

"*Fuck* you little *fucking* prick you're *applesauce*." Billy reaches out, fingers catching his hair, and tries to haul him close enough to continue delivering a beating to his poor, beautiful face.

Steve chokes on a laugh and kicks again, satisfied when he earns another curse. "That's the worst threat I've ever heard in my *life* and I hang out with your *baby sister*."

They scramble on the floor for a moment, both trying to find some purchase in the ice and the water. Billy punches him in the jaw, Steve kicks at his shins and knocks his forehead into his chin and nearly yelps when the blond takes a handful of his hair to yank him back. A little, fucked up part of his brain is disappointed when he feels the weight of Billy Hargrove moving off of him. His chest is heaving and

his mouth tastes like metal. Someone is 'boo'ing them, from the doorway, probably disappointed by the briefness of their encounter and someone hauling the other boy to the side.

"She's *not*." Billy hisses, as if that's the important part of this whole situation. Steve doesn't really care if Max is his sister or not.

To the side he can see Tommy, one hand wound tight in the back of Billy's jacket as he regains his footing. Billy spits and curses at, shoves an elbow back into his face to force him off. The freckled boy raises a hand to where the elbow had connected with his chin, brows downturned as he mutters a 'you're welcome' through his fingers. Billy just flips him the bird and shoves past him, moving through the doorway before anyone can stop him.

"What a bummer, a total waste." Someone huffs to his right, a junior Steve recognizes from the football team. "Nobody even broke anything."

Tommy shoves at his arm with a scowl. "Except my *nose* douchebag. Get the fuck out of here."

"Again." Steve says, mouth running without his mind.

Above him, the freckled boy looks torn between offering him a hand and kicking him. He goes with the former. "Do you enjoy getting your ass handed to you or something?"

Steve really wants to give a negative answer to that but his track record isn't looking great. He settles for shrugging instead once Tommy has helped him up.

"Jesus Christ, Harrington." He releases his hand roughly, sends him back a couple steps as he goes to trail behind Billy Hargrove. Steve tells himself it doesn't bother him. "Get your face fixed."

It's a decent suggestion. Steve considers it for almost a minute, watching the party resume around him. The water and melting ice have left his pants cold and stiff, and he's pretty sure he cut his hand on a bottlecap, but no one seems very invested in cleaning up the mess. The only person who seems even remotely inconvenienced is

Lisa, stooping in her pink heels to at least retrieve the abandoned beers. Her sister has been effectively distracted by something at the door leading to their backyard.

Automatically, he moves to help her. He's not sure he's actually being helpful, though. If the look she gives him says anything, it's that he's just making more of a mess kicking ice around and rearranging the furniture to find the other bottles and cans.

Steve tries to apologize but his tongue feels thick in his mouth. Whatever comes out of his mouth must not be what he was going for, because she furrows her brow at him and gives him a sufficiently grossed out look when he flashes his bloody teeth at her in a sheepish grin. Right. Well. It's the thought that counts, probably.

"Here." She sighs and passes him an already opened bottle, putting her hands on his shoulders when he takes it and steering him toward the back door. "You're bleeding all over the *new* tiles, Steve. Go... outside. Go. Good."

Snorting, he lets her lead him to the yard. He has a feeling she wouldn't be taking this so well if everyone in Hawkins hadn't known each other since gradeschool. "I'm not a *dog* Lisa."

"Really?" She huffs, looking almost embarrassed. Steve finds himself wondering about her crush on him from the sixth grade, debating the likelihood of her letting him sleep in her bed tonight. "You sure seemed like one."

She shuts the door in his face. Steve doesn't really blame her.

Without any other options, he finds his ass firmly planted in the grass underneath the back porch. The drink in his hand has already gone warm by the time he settles, but it's easy to ignore with the numbness of his tongue and headache crawling behind his eyes and digging out a home there.

Nancy is going to kill him when she finds out, probably. After the miniature fit she threw last time he let Billy knock him to the floor during a shirts and skins game, he wouldn't be surprised if she kills Billy too. Steve is willing to bet she hers before she sees him, the

story is probably already moving through the streets as quickly as a certain blue Camaro probably is. She'll inevitably tell Jonathan, too. Which means he'll huff and lecture and tell Steve that *this is why Fridays are for games of Flags* or something about *friendship*, maybe. He's not sure what the first option is, some game Joyce has had them playing since they were still toddlers. Something they'll pass on to their friends and children and grandchildren, if they're lucky.

Or maybe it's a euphemism. He's never really considered it before. Nancy might be too blunt for that. Jonathan, though, *would* beat around the bush about that sort of topic. So really, he guesses it's possible. Then again he is also pretty sure they wouldn't have invited him to *Fucking Friday* so. There's that side of the argument. *Flag Friday* seems infinitely more likely to be a real thing.

The line of thought isn't very comforting either way.

Steve finishes off his drink and leans his head against the wooden support behind him, lets his eyes close and lets his mind wander from Nancy and Jonathan to the damp wind and the muffled music and conversation coming from the inside of the house and the keg stand happening only ten feet or so away. His face burns and his chest is sore and he's bone tired, more ready to sleep than he has been in the past month watching the lights from his pool filter through the curtain in his room.

He isn't sure how it happens, really, but the next day Steve wakes up sprawled with his face in the grass and his jacket haphazardly over his torso like a blanket. Dried blood and mud are all over his shirt, brown and red mixing with the mint green and leaving it unrecognizable. His face probably doesn't look any better, certainly doesn't feel any better. Neither do his shoulders, for that matter, but that's probably more because of his laying in the dirt all night. The brunette drags himself to his feet, jacket hanging loosely from one set of fingers while the other searches his keys for all of his belongings.

Someone has nicked the remaining half of his pack of cigarettes, both of his lighters, and one of his shoes. None of which are necessarily expensive or hard to replace, but it's not something he's excited to wake up to. At least they left him his jacket and his car keys.

Steve looks down at his feet, rubs some of the mud from his hair and ignores the hungover throb that gives his head as he sighs. He kicks his remaining shoe in the dirt and looks around.

There are a number of cans and bottles littering the ground, as well as what looks like a joint and a keg rolled to the edge of the yard. A girl and a boy are sprawled in lounging chairs a few feet away, slumped and snoring with the bottoms of their shirts pulled up to cover their eyes. There are clothes here and there, a jacket and a few shirts and what looks suspiciously like a used condom just by the edge of the stairs. Someone had a better night than he did, then.

Toeing off his remaining shoe, because it's not of much use without the other, Steve starts his trek around to the front of the house. The light glinting off of the windows of the house and the hoods of vehicles blinds him as he rounds the corner, causing him to raise a hand to draw a shadow over his eyes. The hangover is worse than the physical pain. His hands feel unsteady and bile is rising in his throat and, fuck, he must have gotten it either really good or really bad last night because his body from the hips up is *sore as shit*.

His car is, thankfully, mostly clear to get out of the oversized driveway. There's a car partially behind him but he's pretty sure (even hungover) that he can squeeze by it. If not, he's going to honk his horn until the owner of the ugly purple Honda Civic wakes up and moves their car. Well, probably not. But he wishes he could do that.

The first time he tries to get his key into the lock on his door he accidentally uses his house key. The second time he slips, skims the lock and the jiggles the key until it slides in and he can swing open the door. He has fewer issues starting the car, but when he finally does he's pretty sure this counts as enough work for the entire day.

"Holy *shit*." Steve groans when the rumble of the starting car make his temples throb. "I'm never drinking again."

The drive home is only about ten minutes, but it feels like an hour. Steve has to crawl at just below the speed limit, squinting at the sun as it hits the pavement and cursing every time he takes a turn too quickly and it makes his head spin. He's pretty sure he passes

Jonathan, heading toward the theater. Under other circumstances, he might have honked his horn to see the other driver jump. For now, he just sort of counts himself lucky for being able to pay attention to the road with the dryness in his throat and the smell of vomit and blood in his nose.

When he finally - *fin-fucking-illy* - makes it home, he only manages to toe his door shut and make it a handful of steps before he's bent at the waist and puking in the bushes. If he had any neighbors close enough to see him, they would probably be thoroughly disgruntled. Most responsible young adults don't really stumble home at eight in the morning just to lose their stomach in the greenery. He'll have to come spray that out later. Maybe. If he really feels like it.

Steve locks the door behind him out of habit, flips on the lights in each room as he passes and discards his ruined socks and shirt into the trash on his way by the kitchen. Before continuing to potentially track all manners of yuck through the house he ducks his head into the kitchen sink and turns on the cold water hastily removing most of the dirt and bodily fluids from his hair and face. The cool water dripping off his hair and down his neck is refreshing, and he lets himself linger underneath the spray for while, well past when the water comes out clear.

By the time he's done, it's hard not to be aware of the stillness of the house. The quiet that invades the space and leaves his ears ringing as he takes into the nearly bare walls, stale furniture and empty rooms. Steve pulls the picture of his parents off of the wall in the hallway as he goes by, settles it face down on the stand nearby. It's one of the three pictures settled along the walls of the house, and having their tight smiles and dark eyes watch him as he wanders through the house like a disaster is just unnerving. They probably won't notice it being moved for a while, anyway.

He's about to head to his room, is over halfway to the bed that's calling to him, when the phone rings. He tries to reason with himself and say it's not important. He really does. But in the pit of his stomach panic spikes and he *jogs* back down the stairs to answer it, skipping a step and nearly sending himself flat on the floor as he does so. His breath is coming a little faster when he picks up, yanking the phone to his ear.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end is familiar, tired. "Are you okay?"

Steve pulls the phone away from his ear, squints at it, and slowly brings it back. "Uh. Chief?"

"Yes." Another sigh. "You've gotta stop doing this to me, kid."

"I didn't do anything." Disgruntled, the younger man frowns. "I've barely been awake for an hour."

"It's my day off." Hopper continues, as if he hasn't said a damn word. "Do you want to know why I'm awake at eight in the morning. On my *day off*?"

Steve is pretty sure he does not want to know. "Um. Maybe. Yes?" A pause. "Definitely yes."

"There are six kids - that's five more than I have, you know - in my living room insisting that you're dead because you didn't answer the door at seven-thirty this morning. *Six kids*, Harrington. Come *get them out of my house*."

Blanking, Steve sputters. "They're not my kids, either. They all have *parents* - I'm not a parent."

"Listen, I get it, I do." In the background he can hear a commotion, someone yelling gibberish. Hopper groans. "But these ones are your problem."

"I can't-"

The phone gives a *click!* in his ear before the line goes dead. Steve blinks stupidly at the piece of plastic in his hand before helplessly returning it to its cradle and wondering when he joined a less glorified version of Baby Huey and the Babysitters. He isn't sure what they wanted from him so early, isn't sure why he isn't considering just not picking them up and instead sleeping. What a little gaggle of assholes.

After a second of contemplation Steve heaves a sigh, turns around to

retrieve his keys and go pick up the gaggle of kids anyway.

## 4. What's the Damage?

May 22, 1985

Hawkins is decked out in shades of orange and blue, littered with bits of grey to break up the bright colors. The splashes of color breathe life into the cracked sidewalks and rusted trash cans. There are even a few haphazardly spray-painted tigers wandering the town, hidden behind Bradley's Big Buy and and on the sidewalk in front of the Hawk. It's part of the senior prank, along with most of the upperclassmen ditching their last classes a few weeks ago to party hop around the neighborhoods. It's not exciting, but it's something. Probably better than nothing, at least someone made an effort to organize a senior prank this year. Last year everyone had been too caught up in... everything and it had fallen through the cracks. Nothing but a few balloon filled vehicles and floors hidden under a layer of cups filled with water.

It's a decidedly bad prank, though, considering the other residents of Hawkins have chosen to embrace their new striped companions tucked into the corners of the town. The notable lack of annoyance and/or outrage from older residents has taken some of the fun out of it. A few shops have even added to the mess with cubs and tigers hastily painted on their windows, streamers over the doors and (in the case of the Palace) blue and orange food dye cheekily blended into the food products they serve. If Benny's were open, they would probably be following suit just to enjoy the frustrated and defeated looks of the soon-to-be adults. The older man who once owned the restaurant would have enjoyed that, he was always down for a good laugh.

Even after all these years Steve can remember when he was in middle school and got caught struggling to light his first cigarette behind the building. He had been so horrified and anxious about being caught he fumbled and dropped everything into the grass. Probably looked ridiculous, wide eyed and defensive and already spouting off something about how *it isn't even mine, okay, you know, i'm just holding it*. At first he expected the restaurant owner to berate him, kick him to the curb, snitch to his parents or babysitter, Benny never did any

of those things. In fact, he hadn't even looked slightly bewildered or reproachful.

Benny had laughed and retrieved the dropped articles before presenting the cigarette to him. He offered to light it and Steve let him, grateful and suspicious all in one, while the older man talked him through inhaling as deep and hard as he could and holding it. Too naive to realize the mistake he was making, he had pulled at the smoke until tears clouded his vision and he ended up hunched over dry heaving for ten minutes after. And Benny had laughed, slapped him on the shoulder, and brought him inside and to treat him to a shake as an apology for sabotaging his throat and lungs.

Looking back on it, Steve realizes that was the first real one-on-one interaction he had with the man.

A moment that cemented this place as somewhere he wasn't Steve Harrington, son of a successful corporate lawyer and a reasonably well known financial advisor. Steve Harrington, son of two of the wealthiest and most reserved locals who spend approximately a third of the year in the town. In that moment, sitting on a milk crate upturned beside a dumpster full of old expired tomatoes and meat pies, he was just... himself. Steve, the stupid barely-a-teen who wanted to practice looking cool.

Which is why it's a damn shame, really. Two years after Benny's death and they've yet to find anyone willing to reopen the restaurant. Benny never had a wife, or kids, just a few distant cousins and a brother who was on the other side of the state with his offspring. No one is willing to close their fist around the previously family owned establishment, and handing it over to strangers who don't know the history seems wrong. Like a crime.

*Not that leaving it like this is any better*, Steve thinks as he looks at the overgrown grass and the brown bushes and the dark windows. If it reopened it would be different, sure, but the darkened windows and empty lot just feel wrong. One of the windows has a crack running down the side, likely from kids throwing rocks, and the door is starting to get significantly more dulled down and brown with dirt. It's the only place in town now that isn't brightly colored and stuffed full of cheerful teenagers, caught in the in-between where they have

nowhere to be and no responsibilities. It's quiet. Still. Untouched. Unapproachable. *Like a graveyard.*

And it kind of is a graveyard, he decides. It's the first place in Hawkins to really be touched by something unnatural, the place Eleven first showed up, the site of the first death that can be successfully traced back to Hawkins National Laboratory. Steve wasn't there for any of that, of course, but he's heard the story enough that he can imagine being there. Not that he wants to, but it's hard not to after seeing everything firsthand. It's the burial site for everything they've ever known, the end point of everything mundane and normal in their hometown.

Unsettling as all of that should be, it's still where Steve finds himself spending the hours before graduation. The quiet is welcome, for once, an escape from the abundance of near graduates running the streets in preparation for the day. There are rehearsals he could be participating in, a lunch at the Byers he avoided rejecting an invitation to, parties he could be preparing for.

Instead he settles on the hood of his car, ignoring the potential damage he's doing to the paint job as he props a foot up over one of the headlights and rests the other on the front bumper. Steve digs into his pocket, pulls out a lighter and half crushed pack of cigarettes that he's supposed to be weaning himself off of. He'd told Dustin, two weeks ago, that he was *totally done with those things, man, yuck.*

He'll quit next week, maybe. Or the week after that. Or the week, some undetermined time in the future, where his mind doesn't rattle and his shoulders don't jump at whispers of the wind and shifting shadows. For now, though, the smoke pulling into his lungs and the filter and paper against his lips is a relief. A momentary escape from Hawkins, and the shadows drifting in the edge of his vision, and the gaggle of young teenagers that are surely going to give him grey hair before he hits thirty.

As much as he likes them - and he does, despite all of his reservations and the age difference and, well, everything that should create a rift between them - it would be nice not to lose five years off his life for every one he spends chasing down monsters around the town with them.

Not that he's done that, specifically, in the recent weeks. But waking up at seven in the morning on a Saturday to tiny adults beating down his door isn't exactly his idea of a welcome wake up call. He's sure their parents have set them curfews, and rules about not riding their bikes all the way across town at odd hours of the day or night, but the tots either don't care or have mastered the art of sneaking through their homes. They show up in his backyard during the early hours of the day or pile on to him as he's trying to escape from the school and he somehow gets roped into keeping them company into the night whether he chaperones them or they make their own way.

"You're late." The stern, annoyed voice floats from somewhere near the back of his car and startles him from his thoughts. "Get lost or somethin'?"

Sighing as heavily as he can, Steve turns his head to greet the newcomer. "Maybe."

Narrowed blue eyes catch his, fierce and challenging in a way that must run in the family. This is one of the rare occasions where Max has her hair pulled back in a long and tightly braided ponytail. The style calls attention to her high cheekbones and the freckles scattered across the planes of her face as well as the cocky set of her brows. She has one foot planted on her skateboard - a gift she at first adamantly tried to refuse and return, before ultimately accepting that no one would let her - and her arms crossed. Focused. Determined. Knowing that she means business and is here for him has Steve grimacing. It's like these kids have a radar for him or something. Inconvenient and terrifying.

"Haven't you lived here for like forever, old man?" Max taunts him, rolling her eyes. "Is your memory going already?"

"Ha ha." He flicks his cigarette before pointing it at her. "Are you ever going to get tired of the same joke?"

She makes a show of pursing her lips and looking up as she considers it before shrugging and giving him a sickly sweet grin. "Probably not."

"That's great. Really good outlook for the future."

Max shrugs, unconcerned with his totally valid lack of enthusiasm, and moves her foot further back on her board. She pushes down and the front kicks up into a well placed hand. Balancing it like that with her fingers gently curled over the front edge, she looks very pointedly from Steve to his car and back again. When he simply blows smoke out of his nose and squints at her, she does it again. As much as he wants to continue to play dumb, even he isn't so oblivious he misses what she's trying to say.

"Look," Steve starts finally, only to be cut off before he can even start to form an argument.

"No *you* look, asshole." The shorter redhead demands, expression quickly turning sour. "I told Mrs. Byers that I would bring you back with me. Do you *know* how long it took me to ride here?"

"Max."

Realizing just how much of a whiny teenager he sounds like, Steve pauses and rubs his thumb against the bridge of his nose where it never healed quite right. He presses his cigarette to his lips to stall, watching her watching him. It's a standoff for the ages. Stubborn teenage redhead versus weary soon-to-be-adult. Despite his attempts at disarming her by getting to his feet and cocking his brows at her, Steve knows it's a losing battle. If there's anyone hardheaded enough to rival him, it's Max. She's so invested in their staring contest she doesn't even blink. It's unnerving and makes quick work of breaking him down.

Hopefully looking just as put-out and disgruntled as he *wants* to feel, the older boy steps to the side and swings open the driver's side door. Ever the sore loser, Max sticks her tongue out at him in a childish display of victory as she scrambled around to the opposite side. Following a stern reminder to put her probably dirty board on the floor, the young woman flops into the front passenger seat and immediately makes herself cozy. Altering the air conditioning to suit her needs, fiddling with his music to find what she likes, you name it.

He'd given her shit for it the first time she got to commandeer the front passenger seat, until she gave him a wide eyed look and her cheeks lost their color and she spent the rest of the ride hunched

against the window. It had taken him a while to figure out why, a few weeks of listening to Lucas complain to the others about Billy and the way Max always storms out of his car like a bat out of Hell. He's let her be since, allowing her to make the space her own when she gets the opportunity.

"You know," Max starts cheekily as he stomps his cigarette out and eases his way into the car. She waits until he's properly considering her before wrinkling her nose for good measure. "Those things are nasty."

"So are a lot of things, until you hit puberty." Steve shoots back as he starts up his vehicle. He takes pride in the distinct look of disgust she aims at him in response. While they're backing out of the otherwise abandoned lot, he reconsiders his words. "Not that you *shouldn't* think those things are nasty. You should definitely stay way from them until you're, I don't know, twenty? Thirty?"

Snorting, the redhead rolls her eyes at him. "You'll be wearing diapers again by then."

Steve laughs, and a bit of the invisible weight slips off of his shoulders. The rest of their ride to the Byers house continues like this, with lighthearted banter and half-serious teasing about their ages. The lulls in conversation are filled by the music, simple tunes for simple times. And it's nice. Simple. A few moments to pull him out of the sea of thoughts of their futures and pasts. *Dancing in the Dark* drifts from the speakers, the wind whispers against the windows, the sun lays out an ideal day for them to take full advantage of

They deserve it. When he looks over to see Max grinning and singing along - off key and louder than necessary, but at least she knows the words - he decides they've earned it. Especially the younger ones of them all. They're kids and it can be easy to forget that, with all they've done and seen and knowing they're growing up. Hell, even Nancy and Jonathan and Steve are still practically kids. He's reminded of it every time the chief of police calls him 'kid' or Joyce gets teary eyed at the idea that Nancy and Jonathan will be graduating next.

"How did you know where I was?" Steve questions when they reach

their destination, his car rolling to a stop.

"Dustin." Max supplies easily, hopping from his vehicle before he's even unbuckled his seat belt.

Not totally shocking but... "How did Dustin know where I was?"

"I don't know." The younger girl gives him an annoyed look, pulling her board from the car to take it with her. "You could ask *him*, maybe."

The conversation, as well as his curiosity, is forgotten when the door to the Byers homestead swings open and Lucas is loudly demanding that they get inside. Joyce had insisted they wait for him to start, and being presented with all of the food but not being allowed to touch any of it has left the younger boy irritable. He's gesturing at them and complaining, aiming jeers at Steve for his slow pace - which *isn't* that slow, okay, the little shit is just getting hyperbolic. Without pause, a curly head of hair is popping over his shoulder and Dustin joins in on the taunting.

So Steve forgets to ask.

And that day passes, along with the rest of May, and Steve never asks and the question masks itself as inconsequential.

## **June 16, 1985**

Someone buys Benny's Burgers, in early June. The Hammonds take care of it quietly. Benny's brother comes in from Taswell, sits down, signs some papers, walks out of the faded blue door, gets in his car, and drives south to go home. A private transaction. Agreements made behind closed doors. Renovation starts in a week, and until then it's unlikely anyone will be fully aware of the sale until then. It's anyone's guess as to what will replace the local staple. Another down-home restaurant, or a private club, or a bum bar, or a convenience store, or a private facility, or a storage location.

*It doesn't matter*, Steve thinks, *it won't be the same*. There won't be a crate around the back to sit on while he smokes a cigarette. No malt milkshakes with two straws and an extra cherry perched on top

reserved for third dates with pretty girls. No steaming burgers with homemade sauce accompanied by a basket of fries, cooked just a little longer to reach the level of crispiness he favors. No drunken carpools to satisfy cravings or hungover recovery feasts. No sitting with a group of twerps, trying to study with one of them interrupting his efforts every few minutes.

No one else knows yet, and he rather wishes he didn't know as well. He would rather not have time to dwell on it. But his father had offered to supervise and assist with the transaction, as the only local with any experience or knowledge in the field. It's likely he offered some time ago, knowing eventually the property and business would have to pass hands. He had used it as a *learning experience* for Steve, an introduction to what he would be doing soon.

Having officially graduated, Steve knows he has to do something with himself. It's just that, well, he doesn't want to be doing what his father does. It's good money, and a good career, and he does appreciate the thought but Steve doesn't want to follow in his father's footsteps. He doesn't care about the money, or the reputation that comes with it. He doesn't care about how well off and normal his life would be.

Steve doesn't want normal.

He realizes this while driving aimlessly, passing Benny's for the third time in an hour. Considering that thought, Steve slows his car and stops in the middle of the road. No one drives out here often nowadays, there's little to no risk of anyone crossing his path. In the rearview mirror Benny's - though soon, he knows, it won't be called that anymore - lurks and watches him. It's a symbol of the last time Hawkins was an ordinary place. And now that he knows there's more to the world around them than school, job fairs, and careers that suck the life out of people...

Steve doesn't think he can go back to pretending everything is normal, and okay, and cookie cutter. So he clicks on his flashers, and shifts the gear to reverse. The tires of his BMW crawl over the roadway, and he turns to look over his right shoulder as he cuts the wheel and turns into the parking lot. He backs up until his bumper is only a few feet from one of the dark windows, cracked along the

edge.

When he cuts the gas and sits for a moment, the area is eerily quiet. The treeline seems to be taunting him, threatening to close in and suffocate the establishment to take him away. Steve ignores them, casting an ugly look out of his windshield toward the flora, and kicks open the door of his car. The metal '*clang!*' it makes when he closes it echoes in the air, vibrating along the hairs on his arms.

The parking lot looks the same as it has for months. Empty and uncared for. Any shrubs still living, the few that there are, are overgrown and sagging with the newfound weight. There are no cars packed with families or teenagers unloading to enjoy some grub. Dirt is scuffed along the window frames and door, dust making the glass opaque. A shell of a joyous placeholder in their town.

Honestly, he doesn't know what he expected or what he thinks he's looking for. But this place draws him in, for better or worse. Steve approaches the door, jiggles the handle, and finds it locked. Not surprising, but a bit disappointing. He's going to have to find an alternate entrance. Next he goes to the back, unable to stop himself from lingering by the stained dumpster. It's not empty, like it has been for months.

Instead, it's filled with items from inside. Artifacts. Plates, bowls, silverware, table settings, fry baskets - everything nonessential has been trashed. Thrown aside like it never mattered, because no one wants it so it must not have. It makes something deep in his chest ache as it falls with the release of a sigh. For the first, and hopefully last, time of his life Steve actively considers going dumpster diving. Just to grab something, to take something away from this place.

He doesn't, okay, because that's *kind of disgusting* but it's a close call.

Steve looks away from the dumpster and steps to the back door, pressing his palm against the cold doorhandle. He's not really expecting it to give way when he turns it, but it does. The door creaks obnoxiously as it opens, revealing dirty floors and an emptied back room that leads into the kitchen.

Inside, it feels like a different place. Steve runs the pads of his fingers

over the bare metal shelves, and the spots on the wall where the paint is clean and bright from where pictures once hung. He wonders if they were tossed in the trash with everything else, if his brother couldn't handle taking them with him. He wonders if those memories haunt the man he doesn't know, in a different way than they haunt Steve himself.

The kitchen is the same as the back. Coated with a layer of dust and grime, dark and silent with all of the equipment disabled. The line is opened and the slots for various hot and cold held items are filled with empty pans. In the corner, the refrigerator has been roped shut to make it easier to move later. The fryers are empty, showing off the brown stains the the bent element within them.

Forcing himself to step away from the place Benny spent so much of his time, he enters the dining area. All of the tables, chairs, and stools are gone, leaving the space feeling uncomfortably empty. The only seats left are the booths. Steve figures those take more work to remove, and could be remodeled if the new owner plans on opening another restaurant.

There's nothing here.

Nothing for Steve to find or dig into. Nothing to reconcile the events of the past couple years. Nothing to take away from the last standing pieces of a place that meant more than it should have, and never meant as much as it could have.

"Fuck." The word comes out hisses between his teeth. "*Fuck.*"

Steve repeats the word to himself a couple times as he backtracks out of the building, blinded by a dull sort of panic that starts in his chest and makes his hands shake. He can hear inhuman groans and otherworldly howls in his ears, and instead of tiled floors and empty rooms he sees dark dirt walls and winding caverns.

As soon as he gets outside he bends at the waist, planting his hands on his knees and taking in deep breaths. The air stings in his lungs and burns at his eyes and the dust on his hands leaves pale grey smudges on the knees of his jeans. In his peripheral, the dingy blue dumpster sits with the lid propped open by the nearly overflowing

pile of keepsakes discarded into it.

Without his permission or so much as a single coherent push from his brain to his limbs, Steve finds himself propelled toward the metal rectangle beside him. It smells musty and a bit rotten, but he wraps his hands around the bag on top and pulls it out with reckless abandon. It hits the ground hard near his feet with a sharp noise that he knows is glass breaking.

Hands shaking, heart setting a frantic pace in his chest, Steve tears at the tie on the bag. He pulls and twists and yanks at it until it loosens and the shattered remains of mugs and glasses tumble out onto the dirt and grass. He grabs the bottom and lifts so the rest falls out, scattering more glass around him with his shoe to see if there's anything worth salvaging in the mess he's made.

There isn't.

So Steve grabs the next bag, and the next, and the next, until he's got his entire upper body leaned over into the dirty bin to repeat the process. He throws the torn trash bags back into the dumpster each time, to leave a clear view of the articles he's collected on the ground. Salt and pepper shakers, condiment holders, tongs, pots, a tea kettle, a coffee pot, spatulas, knives. A distraught noise pulls itself from his throat as he sifts through it all, chest heaving and sweat beading on his forehead.

He has to nearly climb into the dumpster to get to the last bag, finds himself struggling to haul it over the lip of the metal as his arms protest this unexpected workout. It catches on the side and rips, causing a cacophony of metal and glass and who knows what else falling back into the metal receptacle. The noise makes him cringe, flinching away and dropping the bag.

Steve thinks, for a second, he can feel a plate connecting with his head again and the scar on his head aches.

When the noise stops, everything else does too. It's like the universe hits pause, the Earth stops spinning around the sun, and Hawkins is nothing but a picture of a moment that probably means nothing to anyone but him. The air rushes out of his lungs and Steve breathes

normally, hands braced on the metal edge of the dumpster as he leans over to peer inside.

Benny's brother had not been able to stomach taking the memories with him.

There are white trash bags and thin, square metal frames. The silver borders are filled with photos. Some are of the diner. During construction, before it opened, during the opening day. The last has Benny himself, standing beside the door with one hand holding it open. He's grinning wide, looking at the woman and the two children passing the threshold to his namesake. He looks happy.

Steve reaches inside, balancing over the side, and gingerly pulls the framed picture from the trash. It doesn't belong there. He stays like that, suspended half into the bin with his hands on the photograph and his thoughts somewhere else entirely.

"Sick." The single syllable scares the absolute shit out of Steve. He fumbles the photo, nearly drops it before pulling it to his chest and scrambling out of the trash catcher. "I can't believe this is what you're doing out here."

Whipping around, Steve is greeted by the sight of a younger boy standing just outside his ring of ruined goods. Bright brown eyes and round cheeks pushed upward in a toothy smile, scuffed sneakers and a burnt orange jacket with dark buttons, a head of curly brunette hair trying to escape from a blue cap.

"You can't do that!" He snaps out when his brain has overcome the fight-or-flight response thrumming through his bones.

Dustin cocks his head like a confused dog. "What?"

"That!" Steve gestures vaguely toward him with the hand not clutching his dirtied treasure. "You scared the shit out of me, man."

"Gross." The boy wrinkles his nose, carefully navigating his way around the bits of glass broken on the ground.

"I'm serious."

"So am I." Dustin scoffs airily. "You were just in the trash. Did you find your people or something?"

"No." He says, unsure of how exactly to explain this situation without sounding like he's cracked.

Which, okay, he can admit he might have. Just a little. Just for some number of minutes he didn't bother to count between his discord in the diner and his desperate search for something he can't put a name to or find a word to describe. Steve glances at the frame against his chest, and then to the pile of garbage littering the ground. *It doesn't look great*, Steve thinks, *but not much does anymore*.

Eventually, once he's managed to traverse the area without stepping on too many broken objects, Dustin juts a finger out toward what he's holding. "What is that?"

"It's..." Steve isn't sure, really, what it is beyond a faded photo featuring a dead man and a lifeless building. He isn't sure why he can't loosen his grip on it, or loosen the grip this place has on him. His next words come out quiet and lame. "Just a picture."

"You went trash surfing for a picture?" Dustin snorts and reaches for it with grabby hands. "Let me see."

For a moment he doesn't want to give it to him at all. Steve considers tucking it into his jacket and refusing, despite his inability to figure out why it holds so much value to him. But he relents, unlocking his fingers from the frame and releasing it to the young brunette's hands. It would only result in more poking and prodding and insistence if he doesn't, so he resigns himself to it.

Dustin holds the photo with a carefulness that mirrors the way Steve pulled it from the rubble. He pulls his sleeve down on one side and rubs a soft circle on the cracked glass that didn't quite make it through his disoriented scavenging unscathed. The dust sticks to the fabric of his coat, discoloring the side, clearing up the image. He finally stops, holding the edges of the picture with his fingers and squinting at it with suspicion.

Eventually, when his companion simply continues peering at it, Steve

begins to wonder if he missed something with all the dust on the frame. A disfigured shadow or hulking form with no discernible face. A distant light or a subtle reflection in one of the windows. Hesitant, he steps closer and tries to lean in for a second look. He doesn't see whatever it is that Dustin does. The younger boy tilts the frame as if that will answer whatever unspoken question he's posing.

Shifting his gaze from the photo to Dustin, Steve frowns. "What are you looking at?"

"Benny had hair." Dustin states finally, sounding astounded by this observation.

Steve groans. Of course, it would be something inconsequential. "Jesus Christ."

"On his *head*."

"Yeah," Steve rolls his eyes, plucking the photo from his hands. "That's where some people like to have their hair."

"It's like it all moved from his head to his chin." Dustin points out, looking up at him curiously.

The action calls attention to just how little he actually has to look up. He's almost eye level with Steve's nose, when staring straight. It doesn't seem like that long ago he was only up to his chest, having to totally tip his chin to look up at him in defiance. The time seems to be passing so quickly, lately, and Dustin is growing without pause. Before they know it, he's not going to be just a kid anymore. Not that he really is just a kid, but it's easy to forget that in the simpler moments. One day, probably too soon, he's going to be graduating. Going to college, perhaps.

Steve wonders if he's going to get to see any of that. By the looks of it, Dustin is going to outgrow him. He's definitely going to be as tall as him, if not taller, but stockier too. The boy's shoulders have already started to widen, his legs and arms a little too long on his body, feet slightly funny with how big they are but sturdy nonetheless. Eventually those big cheeks will lose their baby fat and give way to a wide, sharp jaw as well.

And Steve... Well, he isn't really sure where he'll be. Still searching for something in Hawkins? Running his own branch of some corporation? Assigned as the head of a law firm office? Working alongside his father, to eventually take his position when he retires? Traipsing down an aisle to face some pretty girl with nice, well-to-do parents? Raising his own kid, or gaggle of kids, in a comfortable house with a comfortable life wasting away in monotony?

"Do you think that's going to happen to you?" Dustin asks, and Steve is more than a little aghast.

"No." Steve wags a finger on his free hand at him sternly. "That isn't how that works."

"I don't know." He shrugs. "You have a lot of hair, it would be a good beard."

"I'm not growing a beard." Is Steve's sighed assertion.

Dustin pauses, brows rising. "*Can* you grow a beard?"

"Yes!" He squawks, offended. "I shave every day!"

"Do you smell that?" The shorter boy lifts his nose, inhales hard. "Stinks like a lie."

Steve nudges his shoulder lightly, because of the mess around them of course, and looks around. "Where's your bike?"

"Flat tire." Dustin makes a face, tiptoeing his way out of the ring of trashed goods.

"How'd you get here."

"My legs, *duh*."

"You walked?" Steve follows him with much less care, glass crunching under the soles of his shoes.

"That's why I was looking for you." Dustin continues, ignoring the already answered question. "I need a tire."

"How did you know I was here?"

This, finally, makes Dustin pause. He's facing away, fidgeting a little and shrugging. Steve isn't sure what to make of that. When he steps closer the other boy doesn't face him, apparently totally caught up in the sight of the trees. And, okay, sure, nature is cool. Fine. Great. But it's not that fantastic.

"Dustin?"

"So, anyway," the brunette faces him with a tight grin. "I need you to buy me a tire."

**June 17, 1985**

"How did you fuck up the last one anyway?" Lucas snorts, looking over a screwdriver and turning it about in his hands.

"I told you already." Dustin is sitting on the hood of Steve's car, scowling. "There was something in the road."

"Or you need a new set of training wheels." Mike barks out in a laugh.

The shop had been closed yesterday, by the time they got there to buy a tire. So Steve had done it first thing this morning, and he's somehow been roped into putting it on the bike himself. His hands are dirty and his pants are getting stained with dirt and scuffed from the gravel where he's crouched down to work. Or... Try to work. He's never actually done this before, and all he's accomplished so far is bruising the side of one hand and cutting the knuckles of his hands on the...

The turning thing. Steve has no idea what it's actually called. In fact, he's not sure what most of the thing he's messing with here are. Maybe this thing is the chain? He inspects it suspiciously, as if waiting for it to tell him for sure.

Will speaks up with one hand in front of his mouth, as if that will suddenly make Steve deaf to his words specifically. "Is he actually doing anything down there?"

He hears a light huff from Max. "No."

"How do *you* know?"

"Billy works on stuff, sometimes." She supplies, and that's that.

No one really touches topics that concern Billy. Perhaps that's only when Steve is around. That's fair, probably. He hardly sees the blonde around now that he isn't having to duck around him through the hallways and crammed classrooms. Still, when he does it makes something cold settle into his chest and weave its way through his bones. He still hears that voice, those words, echoing through his head sometimes. Still sees wild blue eyes with tiny pupils and feels sweat across his skin.

"I bet Hopper knows how to change it." Mike comments.

Lucas hums and nods. "Maybe we should get him, before Steve hurts himself."

"Again." Max scoffs.

"For the record," Steve sits back and momentarily abandons his project. "I regret agreeing to help."

"No one asked you to change the tire out." Dustin points out amicably. "Just buy it."

"Watch it." Steve warns him, waving his own screwdriver in warning.

The threat on his lips is interrupted by a car pulling into the driveway behind his own, the bumper sticking just a bit into the roadway. Steve notes that he'll have to pull up the couple extra feet next time. Or use his own driveway, he supposes. There's more room, and no gravel to stick into his pants and skin. But that would require actually shoving all of the kids into his car to get them there, and somehow putting the bike into the picture... It would have been a hassle.

Maybe he should invest in a different vehicle.

Or not. Christ. It's an awful idea. Imagine him, Steve Harrington,

driving around in a pickup or a minivan. It's more than a little horrifying. He would lament on that more, but the car doors open and close to reveal their newcomer.

"Jon." Steve greets him with a nod.

"Wait for it." Dustin says immediately.

The passenger side front door opens and closes and a short head of curly hair walks around the front of the car, framing a round face and small smile. The gaggle of kids are whooping and cheering, scrambling away from him and sidelining him in favor of trying to dogpile El. She takes it with gusto, a laugh chiming through the air as she greets her friends. Just normal kids, on a normal day.

Steve's mind conjures a thought. A question. How did he know El was in there, when even Will seems taken by her entrance. *The same way*, Steve thinks, *he knew I was at Benny's*.

"Dustin -"

"Do you need some help?" Jonathan interrupts, again, as he approaches.

"No." Steve says quickly, looking at... Whatever it is he has on the ground. He looks over at the other man and frowns. "How do I get the rest off?"

Jonathan laughs and crouches, rocking on the balls of his feet, and elbows him out of the way. The kids stay off to the side as they work and Jonathan diligently educates him on all of the parts and pieces he's taken off and needs to put back on. He talks him through the work, lets him do a few things on his own. They get so into it that Steve forgets his question, and when they finish with the bike Dustin steals his and El hops on the handlebars and they leave them in the dust.

## **July 1, 1985**

It's a quarter after one and Steve is a little drunk.

Slightly drunk, he reasons with himself as he eyeballs the can he left

just a foot too far away to reach. Just drunk enough that he's feeling too lazy and hazy to crawl to get it even as it tempts him. His limbs feel all soft and his eyes are tired and he's honestly contemplating just sleeping out here, but the blue light of the pool wards him off. It's less noticeable during the day, less haunting, but with the dark crowded around him he envisions a girl with red hair and smudged glasses and a slightly crooked nose. He blinks and he sees a ghost.

Beer forgotten, Steve reaches up to rub at his eyes and looks around. There's no one but him. Nothing but memories. He shouldn't be out here. Uncoordinated with the alcohol flowing through him, he pushes himself forward and onto his knees. It's a slow and wobbly trip to standing up but he gets there, on his own time. When he goes to turn the world swims and he stumbles, foot connecting with the can to his side.

It hops over the ground and rolls to the edge of the pool, falling in with a soft '*splunk!*' at it hits the water. The beer inside leaks into the water, piss yellow against cool blue. Steve watches it as it twists and twirls through the water, tainting the pool. Just like everything that happened has done to this place. He used to love coming out here at night. Floating on his back and watching the sky go dark, the stars shining in greeting. Throwing parties into the morning and watching everyone go from ludicrous to lazy, floating and tossing beers and talking for hours to keep the night going.

Now it does nothing but make a shiver crawl up his spine in spite of the warm, humid weather. Telling himself he'll deal with the can in the morning, Steve waddles his way back to the door and inside. He locks it behind him.

All of the lights are on, as he left them. It keeps the home feeling warm, pushes the shadows from the corners of the rooms. Steve hobbles into the kitchen, scratching at the back of his neck as he goes. He gets into the fridge, knocking the mustard out of the door as he goes, and retrieves another drink. Putting off his celebration, he puts it on the counter and crouches to pick up the bottled yellow condiment.

He stands, replaces it, and shuts the door. Behind it is a shadow that doesn't bend from the light, nothing but thick ink against the tiles of

his kitchen. It turns to him and opens its mouth, a hole of rotating teeth, as it releases a sickening crunching noise. Specks of light float through the air around them, black vines stretch across the island.

Steve scrambles back, trips over his own feet, and crashes to the ground. He can hear it gurgling over him, a nasty combination of noises that raises goosebumps along his forearms. When he blinks rapidly it flashes in and out of existence, along with the dark plant life roaming his kitchen.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Steve wills it to go away. He tells himself it's a trick of his mind, but the ice in his veins gives way to instinct and he's moving. His shoes slip across the floor as he rolls onto his front, scrabbling for purchase until he can get to his feet. Every time he blinks the world around him changes. The paint is chipped, the paint is pristine. The frame of the door is crawling with light, the frame of the door is lit by the overhead light in the living room.

His hand catches on the counter, knocking the beer to the ground. He hears the seal break and the liquid spurting across the floor, takes a split second to mourn *another* lost beer before he's hurtling around the corner.

Being inebriated works against him, predictably, and he ends up nearly falling sideways as he takes the sharp turn to the side. He can hear it behind him. Claws against tile, clicking. Claws sinking into the carpet, ripping at the fabric. Claws in the doorframe, chipping at the wood.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Steve chants as he goes for the door. It screeches behind him. "Holy shit."

He fumbles with the lock four times before he gets it open, swinging the door wildly. It whacks off of the wall, Steve ignores it as he rushes through the doorway. He trips on the steps, nearly falls flat on his face against before he steadies his footing. He can see his car, thanks God he parked so close to the door as he runs toward it. He crashes into the door, yanks at the handle without results.

Keys.

He doesn't have the *keys* to the *car*. He's an idiot. Steve Harrington of Hawkins is an idiot. He's going to die out here because he's an idiot. He wonders who will find his body. One of the kids, probably Dustin. Nancy doesn't come by enough, and neither does Jonathan, and his parents won't be home for at least another two weeks. So, probably Dustin. That's a reasonable assumption, even if he deserves better.

"What are you doing?" Speak of the Devil. "Are you high?"

"I'm not -" Steve gulps in air, staring at the house. All lit up from the inside, the doorway filled with faded white light. He blinks and nothing changes. "I'm not *high*."

Dustin hops off of his bike and wheels it closer, wrinkling his nose. "You're drunk."

"I'm not -" Again Steve stops, looking at the house.

Would a sober person be having vivid hallucinations of extraordinary monsters? Not likely. Steve sags, leaning his weight onto the door of his car and dropping his head back against the roof. Above them the stars spin, reminding him of just how off balance he is and how shaky his hands are. He decides he must be *really* drunk, actually.

"What're you doin' here?" He slurs, lifting his head to look at Dustin.

"You first." Is the challenge in return.

"Tha's not how this works." Steve tells him, with absolutely no intention of telling him what he was actually doing. "It's late."

"Early, depending on how you look at it." Dustin lowers his bike and raises both hands in an up and down motion like a scale. "Glass half empty, glass half full."

"I can't drive you home." He groans. "Your mom is going t'kill me."

"It's fine." Dustin waves him off.

Steve shakes his head, trying to stand straight. He's not exactly successful. "You can't just do this shit, man."

"But -"

"But?" Steve flaps his arms, incredulous. "What if somethin' happened?"

"Nothing happened!"

"That doesn't mean it can't." Steve thinks about the monster lurking in his kitchen, and the Upside Down that consumed his home like a void. "Why're you here?"

"I had a feeling." He says, and clams up. Unusual, for him.

"A feeling."

"And a dream."

They hear the sirens before they see the lights. It cuts their conversation off, filling the air as it bounces off of his home and the trees. The lights illuminate the road as it takes the curve, bouncing off of the trees in red and blue and causing the shadows to morph in the distance.

"My dad is going to kill me." Steve hears himself say, and he sinks back against his car.

He wonders if this is going to count as kidnapping. Or if this will get an official report. Not that it matters. Whichever officer this is will pass it along to someone, a friend or a wife or a coworker or a cashier, and it will pass through the grapevine until it reaches his parents. And Dustin's mother. And everyone else in the town. If Steve had any plans for repairing his reputation, he's watching them go down the tube now.

A tan Chevy Blazer whips into his driveway, the wheels protesting against the cement as it comes to an abrupt halt adjacent to his own vehicle. The sirens stop but the lights continue, illuminating the driveway and outlining them both in the bright hues.

The door to the outfitted police vehicle opens and a pair of thick black boots drop into view, followed by hairy long legs and dark blue sleep shorts. Not exactly the typical uniform of an officer, but these

things happen. The door slams shut to reveal a familiar bearded face, eyes still heavy with sleep, hair matted on one side. Hopper's chest is heaving as he looks between them and the house, rubbing at his eyes.

On the side Steve can't see, the passenger door opens and closes. He can make out small feet in white socks with purple stars sewn into them connected to thin legs. El pokes her head from around the side, eyes flicking around with dark suspicion.

"Dustin." The young girl says, but Steve can't tell if it's a greeting or a question.

"I didn't do anything this time." He says, affronted.

The Chief squints at him. "This time?"

"I'm going to be sick." Steve says, mostly to himself.

"I've already cleaned up way too much of your vomit, kid." The certified adult on the scene says as he steps forward. "Keep it inside your body this time."

"Okay." Comes his stupid response.

El faces him, now. "You were scared."

"No." Steve denies it, but his face gives him away.

"You are scared." El snips at him, frowning. She leans to look around him, into the house, and he sidesteps to block her view. "What's inside?"

He's pretty sure he's telling the truth when he says: "Nothing."

Hopper reaches through the open window of his car and comes back with a firearm held firmly in his hand. He steps past them, toward the house, and Steve watches him go. El is right on his heels, and Dustin shows no hesitation when he follows them. He doesn't have much choice, so he toddles after them. The steps give him more trouble than he would like to admit, but that's fine. He's in no rush to feel like he's lost in, anyway.

"It looks like a wild animal came through here." He can hear Hopper whistle as they step around.

Steve looks down and sees a photo he must have knocked to the floor. Entering the living room, he can see a vase is shattered on the floor and the doorframe is chipped and the floor is scuffed from his shoes and Hopper still has his gun drawn as he steps into the puddle of beer on the floor. The doorframe is chipped. Steve has to rest his hand on it and thumb over the missing chunks of wood to believe it.

The chief of police takes his time, instructing them to wait in the living room. He goes to the back and looks at the pool, goes up the stairs and Steve hears him open and close every door. Steve counts each one as he hears them close to make sure he doesn't miss any. The man takes the stairs into the basement and comes back up unscathed, finally stops to stand in front of them. His jaw is tight with worry or frustration, nostrils flaring at he regards them.

"Are you drunk?" Hopper asks, and this time Steve knows there's no point in lying.

"A little."

Off to the side, still staring into the kitchen, Dustin speaks. "I saw it."

"What?" Steve turns his head too quickly, gets dizzy as he looks at the boy.

"He was here." El supplies, as if that explains anything.

"*What?*" Hopper repeats the question. "Who was here?"

"Dustin." The word comes in no more than a whisper.

"Can someone back this up for me?" Steve is willing to admit he's kind of lost.

Dustin turns to face them, pulling at the sleeves of his jumper self-consciously. "That was my dream."

They'll sit down and discuss this, in the morning. When Steve is more aware and less intoxicated and capable of properly digesting any of

this information. They'll get into his feelings, and how he seems to have Steve Radar, and the fact that El can sense them like dogs sense bad weather. But for now, Steve pushes his way past Dustin and into the kitchen. He slides on the liquid on the floor and has to catch himself on the counter, hobbling his way to the sink.

And then he vomits, because he's an idiot.

## 5. Bad to the Bone

July 1, 1985

It is, Steve has decided, way too early to be dealing with anything at all whatsoever. That includes, but is not limited to, Upside Down related shenanigans. And yet here he is, at nine in the morning, knee deep in just that.

The gathering spot this morning is his living room. At some point one of them must have cleaned up the mess from the broken vase, but Steve couldn't say when or who did it or if he was still asleep or awake when it happened. What can't be cleaned up or stuffed away, though, are the other reminders of last night. The very physical and very real reminders that everything he thought happened did happen. The deep grooves in the doorway catch his attention even more than they did when it was in the early hours of the morning. He's not really sure how he's going to get those fixed or explain why the doorway needed fixed and where his mother's vase went, when his parents ask.

They will, inevitably, ask. Steve is sure of it. If there's one thing they're bound to notice, it's something amiss is their home. He can remember once, in middle school, when he and Tommy were horsing around and accidentally broke the leg on the coffee table. They had fixed it, of course, and by the time his parents came home it seemed like a distant memory. Until, naturally, his father had noticed it was facing the wrong direction.

By the morning the haphazardly fixed table was gone, and Steve was grounded for a month. Which was fair, he guesses, since they did break the table. But overall a moot point considering no one was there to enforce his grounding and he ran around like a hellion regardless. They didn't notice the stories going around about how he and Tommy and Carol were caught behind the grocery store trying to smoke weed for the first time - not that it was weed, anyway, just some ground up herb that burned Steve's throat and made the clerk who caught them cackle.

So when they come home, in however long it is until their trip is

over, they'll notice the little things. They'll notice the rise in the electric bill, and the new lamps, and they won't notice how Steve sleeps with his light on. They won't notice how Steve opens the door of the fridge at arm's length to grab the milk for his father's coffee, but they'll question the two tiles that don't quite match the shade of the others. They'll ask about the holes in the carpet, and not the way Steve wanders the house every few hours to make sure all the doors and windows are locked. And they won't notice the way his hands shake and he rubs at the scar on his skull but they'll ask about the *stupid* vase with the *ugly* misshapen antelope and the fresh paint on the frame of the kitchen door. And that's fine.

Really, it is. Steve is fine with that. After all these years, he's fine with it.

"Are you okay, kid?"

Steve is, in fact, not holes in the carpet are not okay. The missing vase is not okay. The scratches along the curve of the doorframe are not okay. The fact that this is happening in 1985, when all of this should be well done and over and the Gate is closed, is not okay. Also, you know, Steve is *pretty* damn sure he's still a little drunk and it's certainly too early for this. Has that been said already? He's pretty sure it could be said again.

"It's too early." He groans petulantly, just in case no one has made this complaint yet. Someone has to say it.

Hopper rubs a hand down his face and gives him a tired glare. "If you weren't up all night, you wouldn't be tired."

"He has a point." Dustin nods.

"Oh no," the police chief points a thick finger at him in reprimand. "You're in trouble too."

"Me!" The curly haired boy sputters and throws his hands up. "I didn't *do* anything this time!"

El gives him a simple look and shakes her head. "Curfew."

"Maybe I don't *have* a curfew."

"Everyone has a curfew after last year." Steve scoffs.

Looking absolutely betrayed, Dustin slaps the back of his hand against the other boy's chest. "I don't need a curfew."

"You, of all people, definitely need a curfew."

"Please," Hopper groans and hunches forward, elbows balanced on his knees. "Stop saying curfew."

"Does El have a curfew?"

The girl in question wrinkles her nose. "No."

"Yes." Hopper says at the same time, giving her a sharp look.

"I'm self sufficient." El looks proud of her choice in words, chin tilted upward.

"No." The bearded man sighs hard, turning his head to meet her hard gaze. "No, you are not."

"And con-petent." Dustin lightly touches her shoulder and leans in to whisper something to her, causing her to lean closer. When he moves back El sits up straight and nods. "Competent."

"Is Nancy giving you vocabulary lessons or something, Christ, I thought you were doing your makeup -"

"- we *multitask*." Is her even retort. Steve marvels at how firm she is on this, and thinks Nancy's influence will be good for her. But also, you know, scary. Between them and Max, there's a rise in the scary girl population that should put everyone on edge. "Easy."

"You know what?" Hopper puts both hands up and lifts his shoulders in a shrug. "We're tabling this discussion." El doesn't look happy about it, but she doesn't object when he looks at Dustin and addresses him. "So you were out past curfew -"

"- I thought you said to stop saying curfew?"

Steve supplies an alternative term, mostly because they've said

curfew enough that it no longer sounds like a real world. "You were out past your bedtime."

"Why?" Hopper cuts in with the question, likely knowing that the indignant look on Dustin's face means he's gearing up for an argument.

Just like that, the nasty looks falls to something more reserved. Concerned, maybe? Worried? Steve can't be sure. He's never been the best at reading people and the pounding of his skull isn't helping. Whatever the look is, though, he's sure it's not a positive thing. Dustin's brows are furrowed as he looks away and his lips are pulled tight in discomfort. Not that his posture is ever perfect, or even close to it, but it's worse than usual now as he hunches his shoulders. He alternates between playing with his own hands in his lap and picking at the seam of his jeans.

It's not often Dustin gets like this. There's usually a toothy - or, in his case, *toothless* - grin on his face, rounding out his cheeks and giving his brown eyes a bright spark. Now he reaches up and pulls his cap down further to get a little more coverage from their stares, shifting in his seat like he has to go to the bathroom but he's holding it because he's in the middle of a particularly important exam.

"I told you," he says eventually, barely louder than a mumble, when Steve begins to wonder whether or not he plans on answering the question. "I had a dream."

"Not a dream." El tells him, sounding so sure that it's hard to question her. And maybe they shouldn't. She's arguably the most knowledgeable when it comes to the Upside Down and everything that lurks within it. She points to the floor to stress her next word. "Here."

"I was asleep." Dustin asserts quickly, shaking his head fast enough that it makes his hat go cockeyed. "It was a *dream*."

"No." The small girl insists, stomping a foot on the floor. She blows a stray lock of dark hair out of her eyes. "It was here."

"I know it was here." He snips in annoyance. "But -"

"No but."

"God damn it, El!" Huffing, Dustin flaps a hand at her.

Grimacing, Steve shakes his head. "Hey, language."

"Man, like you're any better."

"Dude don't be a rat."

"*I'm* a rat?" Dustin whacks him in the chest *again* and Steve thinks he might hit a child for the first time in his life. "You're a rat!"

"No I'm not." Steve sits forward to push at Dustin's shoulder.

In return, the shorter boy shoves at him. "Are to!"

"Rats." El sounds disgusted, looking between them.

"All boys are rats." Like any good father, Hopper takes this as an opportunity to warn her off of all boys in general.

Looking at him in question, El points at the Chief. "Rat."

"Yes." Steve replies quickly, and earns himself an annoyed look for it from the older man. He's pretty sure El is only making a point of calling out Hopper because he looks horrified and it's funny. "Exactly."

Getting so off topic so fast isn't surprising. Two of them are still stumbling their way into the beginnings of puberty, one of them is still questionably intoxicated, and the fourth is veritably sleep deprived. It's kind of surprising they've managed to keep up the conversation as coherently as they have, considering Steve can still taste stale beer in his throat and Hopper hasn't even had his morning ritual of three (3) cups of coffee and two (2) cigarettes before engaging in any serious daily tasks. The kids are arguably the most awake and alive of all of them.

Steve wonders at that, as he watches them. Their energy levels don't seem to have taken a hit whatsoever despite all of them having a late and restless night. He thinks he was like that, not so long ago. There

were nights, only two years ago though it feels like a lifetime longer, where he decided to forgo sleep and still made it through the school day and basketball practice and drills. Weekends where he and Tommy kidnapped Carol and drove for hours and drank at pools in the next town over and drove back buzzed and joyous a day and half later running on smoke and alcohol.

Now, he's tired. When Steve really thinks about it, he decides he's always tired.

He's tired in the mornings, whether he wakes up and the sun is already in the sky and half the day has gone by or an alarm greets him in the mid-morning or a kid knocking on his door interrupts his dozing. He's tired when he talks on the phone to his mother, and looks over the papers his dad wants him to review before he dedicates himself to working under him. He's tired when he drives the Party to the arcade, or home from the Byers'. He's tired when he's dragged to movie nights with Jon and Nancy, or dinners that paint them all out to be a chosen family, or Ms. Henderson cons him into staying to enjoy baked goods, or when he tries to go on dates with girls who have pretty smiles and distracting... eyes.

For what it's worth, Hopper always looks like he's tired too. *More than he used to*, Steve thinks. The Chief had always been known for lazy mornings and slow afternoons in Hawkins, when it was nothing more than a quiet town. Now he's known for random late night patrols and calls at strange hours to the homes of a collection of rugrats - things that would once have been bizarre but now only serve to highlight the paranoia the past couple years have imprinted on him.

They're the only signs Steve has ever seen of him cracking. He wants to ask if this is hard, if it's always going to be this hard, if the bags under his eyes mean he finds as much trouble laying down and closing his eyes without seeing *something* in the nothingness as Steve does.

"You're not listening." Dustin says and Steve doesn't ask, but it's less because of the discussion and more because he isn't sure he wants to know. He isn't sure he wants to hear that age won't bring with it some sense of calm. "Seriously?"

Caught and aware of it, he admits: "No."

"Seriously!" The boy slumps in his seat and throws his hands up. "Why do I take you anywhere?"

"This is my house." Steve rolls his eyes. "You didn't take me anywhere."

"Henderson," Hopper starts slowly, as if maybe Steve is an idiot and he can't exactly blame him for thinking it. "Was telling us about his dream."

"Not a dream." El corrects quickly, stubborn.

Dustin sighs hard. "Okay, genius, what is it?"

This stumps all of them, the young girl included. She looks at the pajamas on her legs and frowns at them like they might provide an answer. El brings her fingers together like a crab and rolls her wrist, rotating her hand. The motion strikes Steve as familiar and it takes him a few seconds to connect it to Nancy trying to call a specific word or term to her mind. Her picking up on such an absurdly small motion, a little quirk like that, is endearing. It's something he tries to put a mental pin in.

If Nancy hasn't noticed it yet, he's sure her heart will warm pleasantly once he tells her. Maybe he can even convince Jonathan to catch both of the girls in separate photos doing it, and the older brunette girl's reaction. A tender detail in a harrowing time.

As nice as the thought is, Steve can't help but wonder if it's his place. If that bright moment is his to share in, to be a part of. The thought belatedly strikes him that it might be more appropriate to just give Jon a tip about it, and let him piece it together. Would he want Steve to be involved? Would Nancy?

"Sight." El tells them, eventually, and the word registers in the back of his mind.

The rest of it, unfortunately, can't part from his train of thought. Because, sure, they talk. More than talk. Jonathan knocks on his door every Monday afternoon to remind him it's movie night, and to ask

for his help in stuffing everyone into vehicles to pick out the movie and get back and forth. Steve gets the feeling he would get dragged along even if he refused, but they still add him into the rotation and on occasion he gets to flaunt his choice for their viewing entertainment. He shows up every few days or so for something inconsequential - a question, a side in a debate, to show him a photo, to tell him about something someone did - and Steve is always surprised when he doesn't leave immediately after, and roams his kitchen to comment on his food or lack thereof.

And Nancy calls him every couple days, and tells him about her summer internship at the local paper. She tells him about the gross men who run the Hawkins Post, and how all she does is grab coffee and snacks and lunch and gets laughed at. Steve keeps telling her to quit, if she hates it, but she insists she just has to prove herself and climb the ladder. Without fail, she always manages to turn the conversation around on him and grill him on what he is or isn't doing and how he's doing and *is Dustin there because I want to talk to him, too*. Steve appreciates it, he does, but it makes the air feel hot in his lungs.

"What is 'sight' supposed to mean?" Hopper's voice is sharp, expression hard. "What is that?"

El seems to struggle for another word, repeats the gesture that got Steve distracted in the first place. "Viewing."

Maybe they're friends, maybe they're *something* but Steve can't really be entirely sure it isn't out of obligation. That he isn't reading into it. Or expecting to take more than they're willing to give. So maybe that moment isn't his, and the mirror gesticulation between the girls isn't his to notice. Maybe no one will ever notice, and Steve will think of it when they pinch their fingers and turn their hands and it will always be just a thought. Perhaps it's something better left unsaid.

"Like..." Dustin furrows his brows and trails off.

Jonathan is perceptive, in any case. Steve figures if he caught it, the other young man is bound to. He's good with that, grasping the little things, in a way Steve never has been. Things like the way Will speaks more in hums than words on his off days, and pretends to be

sick when he hasn't been able to sleep. Or the way Will raises his eyebrows and then draws them back down in a frown when he sees something he likes, something he wants, and finds some reason he can't have it. Like how Joyce likes her cereal soggy and turns the television on to anything- even if it's just static - to drown out the night.

Things like Nancy preferring hair clips to ties or scrunchies, and the way she lets it fall to hide the redness of her cheeks when she's been crying. Things like the way the sun falls across Steve's pool, or the way the rain catches on hood of the bright green jacket Lucas loves, or the way the stars reflect on the paint of a dark car like a glimpse at their world flipped around and he *has* to immortalize it with a photo. A '*snap!*' and a '*click!*' of a second, an object, a moment, that Steve would likely never have given a second glance to.

Giving an excited nod, El seems to confirm his suspicions. "Yes."

"You know that doesn't make sense, right?" He snorts obnoxiously.

"Are either of you going to explain?" Hopper is trying, and failing, to keep this serious. Not surprising at all, but the fact that he turns to look at Steve for support is. "Harrington? You with us?"

Steve blinks, realizing he's been staring to the side at the barely visible spots of the carpet where it's missing, and forces himself to drag his gaze to the Chief. "You lost me when the termites started debating if it was a dream or not."

"Honestly," Dustin shrugs noncommittally. "It's funnier if we don't explain."

"Rats." El puts in, and the nod from her younger companion makes her gleeful at being part of the inside joke.

"No," Hopper goes for stern but it comes out flabbergasted, so he tries again. "No. That's not funny."

"*You're* not funny." Is the grinning response.

Just to clarify, in case anyone was seriously questioning their comedic abilities, Steve has to give his two cents. "None of you are

funny."

"Now you're just going too far." Dustin warns him, wagging his eyebrows. "I've got *sight*, Steve. I could kick your ass."

"If you can reach his ass." Hopper's grumbled response earns a shout of offense, and a flurry of incoherent comebacks. "Okay, pint-sized, simmer down."

He tries to hold in his laugh, he does, but Steve blows a raspberry and honest to God chortles. "I take it back, *Hopper* is funny."

"Do you want to know what *I* think would be funny?" The man poses the question and answers it himself without giving any of them a chance to reply. "Yes? You do?" He leans forward as if imparting some secret knowledge, one large hand reaching out to grasp the rim of Dustin's hat and steady him. Hopper holds him in place, looking him dead in the face. "If you told me what the hell 'sight' means."

Dustin seems to understand that he does not actually think the topic is funny, because he ducks his head down and leans back, abandoning his hat in Hopper's grip and releasing a swirling mess of curly brown hair. He rubs at the top of his head where the hair is laying flat from sleeping with the hat on, looking put out. "It's called extrasensory perception."

"Extra sense of *what*?" Hopper leans back, taking the hat with him as a hostage and balancing it on one knee.

"*Ex-tra-sen-sory per-cept-ion*." Dustin sounds it out for him like a grade school teacher. While the weary man in front of them doesn't seem to appreciate it, Steve is grateful for the simplification. "Like being clairvoyant."

"Totally." Steve throws his arm over the back of the couch. By now he's pretty sure pretending to understand is his best option, considering he's probably not going to understand what they're talking about by the end of this either way. "Makes sense."

"Don't be a joystick." Dustin throws the insult his way. His confusion must be obvious, because the boy makes a face at him. "A di -"

"Dipstick." Hopper finishes for him abruptly, ignoring the confused look from El.

There's a very brief silent argument between Dustin and Hopper, words replaced with dirt looks and shifting brows and minute shakes of the head. It doesn't end with a clear winner, but it's likely that he'll spill the actual interpretation of joystick once the adult is out of hearing range. The man has to know that, surely, but he stands his ground and taps a finger on the edge of Dustin's hat like a threat. Steve doesn't think he would actually do anything to the headgear, but that's up for debate.

"It's how El saw Will." Is what he decides on saying, as opposed to continuing to insult Steve. "But *I*," he aims a bored look at El for emphasis. "Can't do that."

"You did." Is all she says in response.

"Okay, so say you did -" Hopper raises a hand to stop Dustin when he opens his mouth, and sighs. "- I get it, you didn't. But say you *did* do that." Here he looks to El, because no one else can really answer him. "How?"

"Infection." El says, voice grave enough to raise goosebumps on Steve's arms.

Dustin, understandably, looks horrified. Steve gets that. "Infection?"

El blinks slowly and opens her mouth wide, tongue sticking out. One pale hand rises, a slim finger pointing into her mouth. Down her throat. Then she drops it, tongue retreating and mouth closing. "Infection."

The repetition doesn't clear anything up. If anything, Steve is getting more confused. The sluggish, influenced parts of his brain are stumbling to catch up. El turns her head to look straight at him, something meaningful in her eyes that she can't convey because she lacks the words. Steve watches as she takes a purposefully deep breath and releases it, and forces a fake cough from her throat. The sound rips through his ears and tears into dark tunnels that he wishes he could stop wandering when his eyes close and sleep dances away

from him, sheds like on a plant-like mass of tentacles and the particles it spat into the air.

"Not a dream." Steve hears himself breathe out.

El nods, once, like it's simple, and something repulsive curls in his chest. "Not a dream."

Around him, the conversation continues. Hopper is asking what that means, and Dustin is speaking slowly and staring at Steve in what could only be classified as skepticism. Like he can't believe there's something he missed that the older boy didn't.

Steve thinks that's understandable. It's not often that he's the one catching things that others aren't. That's, possibly, twice in one night. He's really on a roll. Setting a record. Tearing up the scoreboards on this joystick-and-buttons arcade horror game that's currently consuming his life. Has been, since he met Nancy Wheeler. It's either not a very good game or he's just *really* fucking bad at it. Deciding which is closer to reality is hard.

Part of him is aware that he's being addressed by room. Hopper is staring expectantly and El is tapping a finger on her knee and Dustin is still moving his mouth, but it's like he's speaking a new language. Gibberish flows in one ear and out the other, rustles Steve's hair as it blows through the currently empty cavity of his head. Letters and words and sentences all reduced to a dull hum that starts in the the base of his skull and makes his teeth vibrate unpleasantly.

Absently, he reaches up to rub at the scar on his head. His hair covers it nicely, with the way he parts it. Flops over to conceal it in such a way that, unless you're looking for it, it's nonexistent. Steve doesn't have to look for it, in any case. He can always feel it, warmer than the rest of his skin, and now it burns like a reopened wound. So he rubs at it and blinks a few times and tries to focus on what's happening around him. What's real, even if he knows everything is in question from here on. It always should have been.

"What?" Steve asks, the words sluggish as they slide like muck from his lips and leave something gritty under his tongue.

"You don't look great." Hopper tells him and it seems redundant to point out that he doesn't feel great either.

"He looks fine." Dustin looks, and sounds, more upset that Steve feels about the statement. He gives Hopper a sharp look, then directs a falsely reassuring look to him. "You look *fine*."

El makes a face. "Not true."

"Come on!" The curly haired boy kicks her shin gently.

She looks like she is barely refraining from sticking out her tongue at him. "Friends don't lie."

"It's not a lie!" Dustin's gaze flicks worriedly from El to Steve.

Steve knows it's a lie, but he appreciates the effort nonetheless, even when El hisses her response. "Rat."

"You don't even know what that means." The short boy scoffs, clearly bothered by his own term being used against him.

Blinking and primly raising her finger to point at the other young adult, El gives what may or may not be the most brutal verbal slaughter Steve has ever heard in one word. "You."

"Dude," Steve gasps and everyone snaps their eyes to look at him vigilantly. "You're going to need a cold press for that burn."

"*Dude!*" Dustin kicks his shin this time, not nearly as gentle as he had been with El. "Bag your face."

A groan from Hopper draws their attention to the problem at hand. "Am I the only one here taking this seriously?"

Steve feels a little guilty, he does, but focusing on the harsh *serious* reality of things doesn't sound all that pleasant for any of them. The light words and joking remarks are a welcome pit stop on their roadtrip from clueless to informed. He doesn't really want to acknowledge any of this yet. In fact, he doesn't want to *at all*. No 'yet' necessary, because Steve isn't sure he's ever going to want to face this. Even years from now, grown and wearing a uniform of his own

with an apartment and a live that may never go beyond this, he isn't sure he's going to want to settle this with himself.

"No." He manages, when their younger companions are too occupied with avoiding the chief of police's hard look to speak up.

"It damn sure feels like it." And the word are all authority, all Chief and no Jim Hopper. "You should know how serious this is." Here he pauses to look at Steve, then Dustin, then El in turn. "All of you." None of them try to argue against that. No one can. He's right, and even if they don't want to own it they all know it. Hopper holds his hands out, palms up, and spreads his fingers. "Work with me here."

"When we were in the tunnels," Dustin starts and Steve blinks away floating specks of light and writhing tentacles. "There was - well it looked like a *drosera glanduligera*, but I didn't get to check it out."

"That's not what it was." Steve puts in, frowning.

Brown eyes roll comically as the other boys shrugs. "Well that's what it *looked* like."

And Steve doesn't say it but he knows, they all know, nothing is just what it looks like anymore.

## 6. Cheese Weasel

July 4, 1985

They don't tell anyone.

Hopper says it's better that way. Better if they try to figure it out, flesh everything out a little, know what they're dealing with before they put something so hard on everyone else. They're all dealing with enough as it is. Normal things like grappling with puberty and accepting change, or coming to terms with adulthood as most see it, or trying to let go when watching someone grow up too quickly. And, of course, not so normal things. Like trying to not stall when they see defective lights, or reconciling with the truth writhing beneath Hawkins, or wondering if they'll ever get out, or learning to control abilities no one has any sort of experience reigning in.

It's easier not to tell them. Easier to ignore it, or pretend - or whatever it is Hopper does to deal with these things, because Steve sure as hell still hasn't figured out how he does it.

"Fireworks." Lucas sighs the word in excitement, fidgeting so much that the blanket laid out folds over itself. "They're basically the best thing ever."

"Up for debate." Will tells him, grimacing. Steve wonders if they dislike them for the same reasons, wonders if the Byers boy appreciated them more a few years ago the same way he did, before the explosions shook his bones.

"If you're a *lame-o*." Lucas scoffs.

Max leans toward El, hiding her words behind one hand. "They're not that great, but they're cool."

"Just because you put your hand up doesn't mean we can't hear you." Mike's complaint is met with a roll of the redhead's eyes. "We don't need to read your lips to know what you're saying."

The occupants of their blanket continue arguing and Steve tunes

them out as he takes in the view. Dustin had scoped out the highest point in Hawkins to see the fireworks, adamant that the view makes a difference, and they had laid out blankets to observe the festivities. He's stationed himself with Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy a few feet away heatedly discussing which fireworks are the best. Hopper, as expected with this particular holiday of drinking and partying, is on the clock. Driving through the roads of Hawkins somewhere below.

From up here it all looks so small. So far away. It's easy to forget, sometimes, with all of the underlying disaster and buildup of secrets, just how tiny their town is. For years, Steve had hated it. Felt like he was locked into this place while his parents saw everything else the world has to offer. Now he hates how large it seems. How the streetlights loom overhead, much taller than they seemed when he was a child. He hates the way the downtown streets wind out into the forest, and how the trees create a maze of flora hiding away Hawkins with bark and leaves.

"They're the same every year." Will hums, bored, as he digs a stick into the dirt beside the blanket

Steve admits, "I never noticed."

"That's bullshit." Lucas objects easily.

From the other blanket, Joyce's head pops up and her hair flies around her face when she whips her head around to frown at them. She's been growing it out. *It looks good*, Steve thinks, *makes her look younger*. "I'm going to trust that I misheard you, over there."

"Bologna." Lucas says quickly. "I said bologna."

"Of course you did." Joyce replies tartly, and returns to her previous conversation cheerily.

Mike waits until her attention is diverted before he shoves the other boy's shoulder with a snicker. "Dude, you're scared of Will's mom."

"He should be." Will's tone is full of pride, and a lofty smile lifts his cheeks.

Seeing all them smiling, enjoying the rush of being a kid, is good.

Steve thinks it's been months since he saw Will smile like this. *Really* smile, with a crooked tilt of his lips and his teeth showing. Dustin looks relaxed, for the first time since they all sat in his living room in the early hours of the morning. Sitting in front of him, Will and Mike are bickering back and forth like things haven't changed at all despite the past two years. Max is opposite of Will, on Steve's left, sandwiching El between himself and her. Right now she's invading the other girl's personal space to get away from the adolescents exchanging insults and jeers.

"To be fair," Steve nudges Will's knee with his left foot playfully. "I'm scared of your mom."

"You should see her when we wake her up early."

"Yeah?"

"She's pretty gnarly." Will whispers in his direction, glancing over his shoulder to make sure she isn't listening. "Like Medusa."

Steve has to think about that one for a minute, pick through all of the Dungeons and Dragons knowledge afforded to him by all the time spent around the growing Party. "The one with the, uh, the snakes?" He brings his hands up to wiggle his fingers and make vague gestures near his ears. "In her hair."

"Exactly!" The boy with the bowl cut nods.

Over his shoulder, Dustin gives him a thumbs up. "You got it, man. You're learning."

"I have a good teacher." Steve looks around him, at the little band of delinquents that seems to grow every time he blinks, and has to make a correction. "Teachers."

"Hey Max," Lucas turns his head to give her a charming smile and bat his lashes at her.

The redhead already knows what he's about to say, apparently, because she turns her head away from him. "Don't even."

"What?" He holds his hands up in premature surrender. "I didn't say

anything!"

"Good." She raises her nose and cuts her eyes at him menacingly. "Because I *don't* want to hear it."

"Hear what?" El's dark brows are pulled down in her confusion.

"Lucas wants Max to learn how to play D and D." Mike informs her, putting his face in his hands and rolling his eyes upward as the other couple in their circle exchanges dirty looks. "Max is uneducated, so she doesn't get it."

The girl in question plucks a handful of grass from the ground and leans forward to rub it into his hair and Mike swats at her hands as she retreats. "I *get* that it's for super nerds."

Steve is lucky enough to have a front row seat to watch this war start and unfold around them. Mike is throwing blades of grass at her, while Lucas starts listing off everything that makes Dungeons and Dragons probably the best thing ever. Max tries to plug her ears and when the boy raises his voice she escalates their battle, pulling a large chunk of dirt from the ground. Some of it falls from her fist in the cracks between her fingers as she divides it between both of her hands, but most of it lands in the hair of the two boys when she throws it at them.

This, understandably, leads to the two of them retaliating in turn. Steve is sitting just far enough away to avoid *most* of the dirt being hefted around. El isn't, though she doesn't make any effort to avoid or stop it either. She brushes some of it from her shirt into her hands, rubs it between the pads of her fingers and sifts it between her hands with a small smile. Unbothered by the light brown stains it leaves on her palms and her shirt, that Joyce will inevitably have to get out because Hopper can't even get the ketchup stain out of the elbow of one of his work shirts.

"You're so immature." Max sneers around her arm, held up as a shield from the rain of dirt and grass.

"*You* started it!" Snaps Mike.

"No I didn't!"

"Can it -"

"You can it -"

Lucas swats the other boy in the chest, head whipping to the side. "You can *both* can it!" One hand raises to point upward, where a sharp line of warm light breaks apart the sky. "They're starting!"

The assault, and the petty argument, are brought to a halt by a distinct '*crack!*' in the air preceded by a flash of light and followed by a burst of color over their shoulders. Lucas whips his head to the side. The sparks of light shimmer and bring light into the sky above Hawkins, outlining the Party in bright red. Another firework launches into the air before the last has stopped falling, bathing them in soft white and then giving a sharp '*pop!*' when they go off for a second time and the hue transitions to blue. Outlines of stars and stripes paint the airspace.

It spikes fear in Steve's chest, as his brain stumbles to catch up with the sound. He hears an echo of something cracking in his head, feels the way his skin split along his hairline like the wound has just happened. He has to resist the urge to hunch and cover his ears to block out a nonexistent stampede of otherworldly paws and claws on rocks, to hide from inhuman screeches with the likeness of glass being shaken in a can.

All of the colors and shapes fade as they fall. The closer they get to Hawkins the more distorted they appear until they seem to get sucked into the town. Steve squints at the vivid display, trying to discern if they're the same as last year. But the last time he had paid this much attention to the light show was probably when he was a kid and the experience was fresh and new, when the event was less about partying and more about fascination.

"Fireworks." El breathes the word, releasing her handfuls of dirt and watching the sky.

Washed out colors flash in her eyes, brown orbs lighting up with excitement. Despite having seen them plenty of times already over

the years, most of the other young teens have a look in their eyes that mirrors her own. When Steve looks over at the others he's a little relieved to see that childish wonder in Dustin's goofy grin. Beside him Joyce has a fond smile on her face, contrasting with the tense curl of her fingers over the curve of her knees.

Jonathan is watching his mother, and Nancy is watching Jonathan. Both of them are blind to the alterations to the sky, the red streaks highlighted in gold. It's hard to tell what either of them are feeling or thinking, but Steve gets the nagging feeling neither of them are absorbed by anything positive. He doesn't look long enough to try to figure it out, tearing his gaze away. His focus is returned to the sky, distracting himself with the lights dancing in the air.

His frustration must be written on his face because Will leans closer to him, whispering with a secretive smile. "The next one looks like a shooting star." The boy raises a finger to draw an arch in the air. "Watch."

The sky goes dark for a moment, a brief intermission in the sets of fireworks pervading the air, then a trail of white rises from the ground. It goes higher than the others, drawing a path over the lines of the buildings. There's a '*crack!*' just before the firework splits, a sizeable white star surrounded by flakes of gold. Behind it comes two more, thin starbursts of blue and red trailing behind the first. It loses its shape quickly but it does, Steve decides, look like a shooting star.

"See?" Will's hand falls back into his lap.

"Bullshit." Lucas scoffs under his breath to avoid the ire of Joyce.

Just as soon as the blended colors have cleared the air, another takes its place. This one goes straight up, a streak of red that seems to halt high above their heads. Suspended there in the air for an impossibly long time, blocking out the stars with a haze of red. Time seems to stop as Steve looks around, taking in the shared grins and lifted shoulders of the kids. The waning smile on Joyce's face and the way Nancy and Jonathan exchange a tight look.

When Steve blinks and looks up he's aware that the next firework is going off, but he doesn't hear the telltale crackle of the pyrotechnics

in the sky. It's like they're part of show and the viewer has pressed a button to mute them, to take in the look of abstract horror as it spread across his face. It's not the silence, the sudden lack of noise and commotion, that drips cold fear and dread down Steve's spine.

It's the dome of red that hangs over Hawkins as the illuminations fall, the cage it makes around the town, and the tendrils of black that lurk behind it.

It's the massive figure looming over their home, held up by spindly legs that make it look like a spider when he knows it's so so much more than that.

It's the way the world disappears around him, gone. The way the blanket is replaced by slick grass under his hands and ass, the way the trees are outlined in red instead of the Party, the way dim particles of light float around him like snow defying gravity.

It's the way he looks over at Dustin and the boy is frozen staring straight forward, jaw slack and brown eyes wide and shining with wet.

Steve squeezes his eyes shut and turns his head forward and unconsciously raises one hand to the scar on his scalp, trying to will it all away. Trying to force reality to morph around him and give them just this. Just this moment of normalcy, this moment where they're nothing but people on a hillside watching a celebration that will outlive them. He pleads with something like God, though he can't see he really believes in that, for the rush of his heart in his ears to give way to laughter and explosions.

"Are you scared of the fireworks?" Mike is giving him a look of disgust and amusement when he cracks his eyes open. "*Dude.*"

"I'm not." Steve can't tell him what he is scared of, though.

"Okay, but..." Mike snorts and Steve can't tell him that he's horrified, that he's broken out in a cold sweat that makes him nauseous. "You kind of are."

Lucas rolls his head back and cups a hand to holler at the sky as he

extends the vowels when he speaks. "We-a-k!"

"Harmless." El reaches over to put a hand on his arm briefly. She can probably feel the sweat on his skin, the way his terror pulls at the air as she withdraws her hand. In fact, Steve knows she can. "It's fine."

Swallowing the lump in his throat that feels like razors, Steve grimaces. "I *know*."

"Did you see him?" Mike leans to nudge Lucas with his elbow, while the dark skinned boy imitates him. Steve would be offended, if he could stop feeling freaked out. "That's a solid impersonation."

"I know." Lucas flaps a hand at him. "I've been practicing my 'Steve' you know."

The youngest Wheeler nods. "It's worth it, you nailed it."

"Shut up." Will stretches his leg to kick at them, rolling his eyes. "You're scared of *Nancy*."

"Hey!" Mike smacks the other boy's leg and risks a glance over his shoulder to ensure his sister hasn't heard him before he hisses: "No I'm not!"

"Yeah, but you are." Will shrugs and pulls his leg back, gives Steve a supportive look. He appreciates it, he does, but it makes him feel worse. "So you have, like, zero room to talk."

"Less than zero." Max is inspecting her nails, picking the dirt from underneath them. "Negative amounts of room."

Steve has to tune them out, leaning back and sucking cool air into his lungs. To his left he can see Dustin and Joyce conversing in low tones, the former looking sick and the latter looking concerned. Over her shoulder, the younger boy meets his gaze for a moment before he looks away and rubs at his stomach. Probably concocting some story about his mother giving him too many sweets, and it's late, and he thinks maybe he has a stomachache. Hopefully it's enough, for now, for her to push it away and leave it be. Hopefully it buys them a little more time, a little more room to just keep living, which that's better than nothing.

The illuminations are gone from the sky now. Steve notices this only because he has to look back out at the scenery to make sure *it* is actually gone. To reassure himself that the disconnect between their world and the one underneath of them was only momentary, and that he can breathe. The lights in the sky are gone, and so is the unfathomable force that keeps trying to wiggle into their lives. Left in its steps are the stars greeting them in the sky, the moon pinned against the purple and black sky.

As they're packing up he has to keep sparing glances out into the darkness, between his efforts to collect their belongings and ignore the shadows wavering against the trees. Will and Mike spend more time arguing about whether or not the fireworks have changed than actually helping anyone.

"They were just shorter this year." Will sighs, taking his end of the blanket and shaking it off.

"Shorter." Mike shakes his own side aggressively. "That's different."

Muttering in response, the brunette boy pulls the corners together. "Only by a few seconds."

"Still different."

"Dude," Will stops short as he catches sight of the Wheeler boy's side of the blanket, furrowing his brows and jerking his chin at the other boy. "Fix your corners."

"What?" Looking down at the blanket pulled unevenly together, he rolls his eyes. "Is this *bothering* you?"

"Yes." The shorter boy cringes. "Come on, just put them together."

"Okay." Mike tugs the end that's hanging lower until it is a few solid centimeters higher than the other, and raises his head to give his friend a wide eyed look. "Like this?"

Apparently, the Byers boy doesn't have time for this nonsense. Will marches forward and snatches the fabric away with a huff, and clumsily organizes the blanket in his hands himself. Once he's satisfied with the corners being evenly held together, he folds the blanket over

his arm twice and clutches it to his chest defensively. As if he expects Mike to disarm him and take it just to mess up his hard work. Which, Steve thinks, is probably fair.

Max and Lucas are collecting various drinks and snacks and personal items. Nancy and Jonathan do their part, showing El how to properly fold and pack up a blanket and trying to direct the teens back down the hill to their waiting vehicles. Joyce rubs Dustin's shoulder as she leads him ahead of the rest of them, talking about remedies for his upset stomach and how he'll feel better after he gets some rest.

And Steve keeps stalling, folding and refolding his blanket, watching the shadows and the sky suspiciously. He falls behind the rest of them, close enough to be safe but *just* far enough behind them and up the hill to keep watch. To be prepared. To make sure there's nothing rustling in the trees or reaching for them with an icy set of curved digits.

Dustin shares a serious, worried look with him as he ducks into Joyce's car at her insistence. El and Max are shuffled in right after him, while Lucas and Mike are pushed into his own car. Paranoia keeps Steve from getting into the driver's seat, bouncing his leg anxiously as he watches everyone exchange goodbyes and make vague plans. He wishes they would hurry *up* and get *in* their cars and go even though he knows that won't make them any more safe than they are out here, together.

Honestly, they're probably more safe together than apart. Maybe that's what keeps him there, one hand on the hood of his car and the other moving between his pocket and his hip, while they all get ready to disperse. The thought that together they're... together. They have each other. They can watch each other's backs. They have more eyes and ears and minds in one place. Preparing themselves, as well as anyone can, for things beyond the grasp of anyone outside of their circle. Steve can see them, all of them, and they can see him, and Steve can *know* without question that they're *there* and *safe* and -

"Steve?" Jonathan is standing a few feet away, watching him, far too perceptive for anyone's good.

Steve has to force the air out of his lungs in one harsh go. "Yeah?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Of course, man." He puts a smile on his face, an attempt at being casual, at being okay. "Why wouldn't it be?"

The brunette grimaces, so Steve figures his attempt must not be very good and he lets the shaky smile fall. "That was bad."

"Was it?"

"Really bad." Jonathan is blunt, honest. Steve appreciates that. "You looked like you were about to shit yourself."

"Maybe I am." Steve counters with raised brows.

Jonathan looks an appropriate amount of disgusted and shakes his head, but he doesn't push it. "We're staying out for a while." Then he clarifies: "Nancy and I."

"Okay?" He can't tell if that's an invitation or an offhanded remark.

"Are you..." The younger boy trails off, leaves the unfinished inquiry hanging in the air. "The Mancel sisters are having a party."

Not even slightly surprising. Everyone who is anyone is at or hosting a party tonight. Plus, Lisa leaves next week to make her trip a quarter of the way across the country. Steve can't remember where she's going to school, or what for, but he's glad she's getting out of here. Debra is devastated, but he's sure when she graduates in two years she'll go running too. As much as their party is for the holiday, it's a goodbye.

Thinking back on his last foray into their home, Steve is *pretty* sure neither of them would be exceptionally excited to see him. Indulging in a minor brawl in their kitchen was, probably, a bad idea. A questionable one if nothing else. He's sure if he goes there he's going to awkwardly apologize, again, and more than likely have to avoid another unwanted encounter with the elder Hargrove offspring. Steve has done a great job not running into him since then so far, he'd rather like to keep his streak going.

"You know," Steve glances at the two boys ducking behind their

hands, plotting against him in whispers and weird looks. It's going to be a long ride home, he is sure of it. "I think I'm going to throw in the towel while the scoreboard is on my side."

Jonathan squints at him, lips twitching upward with his amusement. "You, Steve Harrington, calling it quits?"

"I know." He gives an exaggerated shrug. "But I'm a changed man, Jon. You'll see one day, when you get older and take on professional babysitting."

"Rugrat rearing?" Shaking his head, Jonathan chortles.

"Child containment?" Steve snorts and allows himself a grin.

He wants to say something, though he isn't sure what. Something about driving safe, or about El's mimicking Nancy, or not staying out *too* late. A hard knock on the window behind him stops the words before a sentence can even fully form. When he cranes his neck to investigate Mike is making an ugly face at him and Lucas has his fist against the glass, both raising muffled complaints from inside the car. So he doesn't say anything and he wonders if that's just easier, too.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about." Steve comments, looking back at Jonathan. "They're going to be what kills me."

There's no chance for him to respond, because Joyce appears from behind her son like a rabbit out of a hat. She stops briefly to squeeze his shoulder and then glides past him to get to Steve. Before he can protest or try to retreat she has one hand on his elbow and the other on the back of his opposite shoulder. Joyce embraces him the same way he's seen her envelope her own children, the same way he's seen her hug Nancy and the kids. It's warm and firm and all encompassing, as if her grip alone can shield him from everything else.

It isn't the first time Joyce has welcomed him into her arms, and he's fairly sure it won't be the last, but Steve's reaction is always the same. Deep in his chest a dull ache makes it home, settled in such a way that it hinders his ability to breathe in and out like a fully functioning human being who has been alive for nearly twenty years. His hands hover in the air at their sides and wide brown eyes meet with

Jonathan's over her shoulder.

Distantly, he decides that he feels betrayed by the obvious mirth in the curve of his cheeks and crinkles at the corners of his eyes. Steve wonders, like he does every time he's in this situation, why there's nothing more than that in Jonathan's expression. If it were him, watching his mother try to invite him into their lives, might feel bitter. Resentful. *But Jon never does*, Steve thinks, *and I guess it's not really the same*.

Steve's hesitation, his automatic malfunction in the face of her physical affections, doesn't ward her off. He always suspects it might, but Joyce allows him time to adjust and figure out how to operate and respond properly. Eventually, he raises his arms to tentatively return the hug.

"You'll let someone know when you make it home." Joyce isn't even pretending to ask. She pulls away, moves to grip his elbows and looks over him with a sharp, protective gaze.

"Of course -" After all this time, Steve still has to pause abruptly and remind himself not to call her Mrs. Byers. "Joyce."

"Of course." She releases him, and gives the same look to Jonathan. One brown brow rises as she addresses him. "Home at a *decent* time."

Jonathan nods, stuffing his hands into his pockets and lifting his shoulders in unspoken surrender. "You know I will be."

"Good." Joyce looks between the two of them, satisfied, and then something more mischievous flashes in her eyes. She raises one slim finger to point at her son accusatorily. "If Nancy stays again you get an extra pillow this time. When you break my rules you at least do it the right way."

Steve cackles, trying to bite his lip to hide it, and Jonathan sputters incoherently. His ears and the high points of his cheeks are growing red, dulled by the darkness brought by the time of the night but still very much visible. The younger boy slowly brings his hands from his pockets to pull at the collar of his denim jacket uncomfortably in a failed attempt to use the fabric to hide his blush. His discomfort is,

quite frankly, *fucking* hilarious. Steve makes an ugly snorting noise at his own thought, clapping one hand over his mouth.

Despite what many - and by many, he means pretty much all - of their peers think, it's not spiteful or uncomfortable.

Well, okay, Jonathan being caught by Joyce is a little uncomfortable and embarrassing for him personally but that's not the *point* okay. The situation isn't uncomfortable. Steve's laughter isn't snide or mocking, it's genuine and friendly. Maybe that doesn't make sense, to most people. And maybe that's why they all assume to know what is and isn't there.

There was a time, Steve can admit now, where it hurt to look at Jonathan or Nancy or Jonathan *and* Nancy. A time where this whole exchange would have left his eyes burning and his throat closing and his heart splitting. Things are different now. Weirder, also, but that's less than surprising. Now Steve has come to terms with who he was, and who he is, and who they are, and he can see that things are better this way. That all of them are better now than they were then, regardless of the circumstances that got them here.

"And you." Joyce turns back to him, finger aimed his way now, and breaks through his thoughts and laughter. She reaches forward to tap her nail against the breast pocket on his coat, where a thin rectangular carton gives a hollow noise in response. "Not too many of these."

Just as suddenly as Joyce had appeared a minute ago, Nancy is frowning at Steve over the older woman's shoulder. "Dustin said you were quitting."

"Dustin sure says a lot, doesn't he." He takes a step back to get away from their attention, knowing a losing battle when he sees one. "I was \_."

"Was?" Nancy interjects sharply, arms crossed, but her lips are tipped in a smile.

Steve looks over at Jonathan for backup. The other boy promptly rejects him with a shake of his head, likely in retaliation for his

laughter seconds ago. Traitor. "I *am*."

For once, Steve is sincerely grateful for the twerps in his back seat coming through with another interruption. The rear left door opens quickly, whacking the back of his calves. Lucas pops his head out with an exasperated huff, following shortly after by Mike's gloomy glare. Their adolescent anger saves him from defending his bad habits. Really, it's shocking that they didn't get tired of waiting sooner. The fact that Max, El, and Dustin are content to spend more time together lingering in the other vehicle is less so. They've always been a bit more patient.

"Are you seriously having a play date?" Lucas groans at him, slapping the door of the car.

"It's a..." Steve searches aimlessly for something not totally lame as an excuse.

"Council meeting." Nancy supplies helpfully from the sidelines.

Mike rolls his eyes. "No it's not. You don't even have the Chief here."

"Does he have to be?" Steve challenges him lightly.

"Duh." The younger Wheeler scoffs at him like he's an idiot.

Nancy frowns, pushing some of her hair behind her ear. "Who put Hopper in charge?"

"I feel like this is the sort of thing a council should vote on." Jonathan puts in very seriously.

Steve doesn't even have to take time to weigh their options, he raises a hand by his head to put in his vote. "Can I, you know, uh." The word doesn't come to his mind. "Nominate?" He risks a look around at his makeshift audience, and Mike gives him a nod to reassure him that he has picked the right word. "Right. I'm nominating Joyce."

"What?" The woman in question furrows her brows. "Hold on -"

"I'll second that." Nancy's hand joins his in the air.

When Steve and Nancy both turn their heads to eye Jonathan, he already has his hand up as well. "Well who *else* would I vote for?"

"Hopper." Is Lucas's suggestion. "You know him, right?"

"Don't we get a vote?" Mike asks petulantly. "I'm voting for El."

Lucas cuts his eyes at his friend, groaning again. "*Dude.*"

"What?" The curly haired boy sniffs and looks away. "She could kick all of their -" Mike looks at Joyce and blows out a breath. "Butts. All of *your* butts."

"You definitely don't get votes." Jonathan tells them pointedly.

"That is *so* unfair." Lucas whines. "You're not old enough to hold office either."

"What does our dignitary think?" Nancy angles her head toward Joyce. Thank God, because Steve isn't entirely sure what that term means so without the indication he would be a little lost.

Joyce considers them all, likely taking her time deciding how seriously to take all of this, and hums. "Well..."

Looking hopeful, Mike leans closer and puts his weight on the car door. "Well?"

"It wouldn't be very responsible to put anyone underage on a council but under these circumstances..." Joyce gives a hard look to the three of them that are on the cusp of adulthood, nods to herself. "We'll lower the age requirement to seventeen."

"*Seventeen!?*" Mike hollers in offense, and then throws himself down into the backseat with an annoyed grunt. "I'm ready to go *home* now."

"We should outrank you." Lucas grumbles and plops into the seat by the door to scowl at them. "You would all be lost without us."

"Hopeless." Comes Mike lowly.

Immediately, Lucas has a response to start an awful back and forth of

complaints. "Useless."

"Pitiful."

"Wasted."

"Feckless."

"Goners."

"Hapless."

Steve has to stop them. Partially because they're capable of going on forever, and partially due to his inability to understand them. "I'm not even sure all of those are words."

"They are." Mike tells him, but the sneer on his face implies he could just be fucking with him. Maybe Steve should start carrying around a dictionary?

"See!" Throwing his hands up, Lucas drops his head back against the seat in despair. "You're already lost."

"Shut up, man." Steve stretches his arm to bat at the boy's shoulder. "You're not even tall enough to ride all of the rides at the fair."

Lucas's comeback is so swift, so prepared, that it fully takes the words from his mouth. "You're only tall enough because of all of your sentient hair."

"That better be a compliment." Is all Steve mumbles, screwing his eyes up to look at the loose strands across his forehead and reaching up to pat at his *superb* hair.

"It's not." The umber skinned boy snips back.

Jonathan does come to his aide this time. "It's not an insult, either."

Bobbing his head from one side to another, Steve figures that's the best he's going to get from mouthy teens this late at night. "I'll take it."

"Stop being such a cheese weasel." Mike is definitely upping his insult game in the presence of Joyce, since he's limited to not using worse language. "Can we go already?"

To the side, Nancy shares a weary look with Joyce and sighs. "Boss?"

Deferring to the head of the Byers is already easy. She might not be the chief of police, or have super powers, or be a D and D informant, but it makes sense for her to lead them. The whole thing might be a joke, but it's a fitting joke. The woman is a badass, and they should all know it by now. While Hopper can provide the bulk to back them up, she levels them out. Joyce's laugh rings through the trees, echoes in the soft spots where there's nothing to absorb the sound.

"Meeting adjourned. Please," Joyce's laugh rings through the trees, echoes in the soft spots where there's nothing to absorb the sound. "Go home."

Inside the car Mike gives an exclamation of relief, leaning over Lucas to pull the door shut. The boys are happy to bypass another round of farewells, apparently. Steve would prefer to do the same, if only to avoid the worries that inevitably go hand-in-hand with sendoffs. So he opens the driver's door and ducks into his car, just fast enough to skirt another soul twisting embrace from Joyce.

Steve's not fast enough to get away from her hand on his shoulder and the last parting words, and the soft brush of her palm across his cheek when she tells him he needs to get more sleep. He also is not fast enough to avoid Nancy, who he finds plants herself right in his way when he's about to pull the door shut. Jonathan is the only one to spare him from one last interaction, tapping his knuckles twice on the hood of Steve's car instead as he goes to get into his own.

"If he gives you trouble," Nancy starts slyly.

He finishes for her easily: "Make him walk beside the car the whole way, got it."

"He knows better." In the back, Mike comments something about them being *not funny even slightly* as Nancy nods.

"We'll be fine." Steve says it as much for her as himself, even though he can't tell her.

The girl nods again, bringing attention to her sharp features and recently trimmed hair. It's a few shades lighter than it was last year, from being out in the sun, and pairs well with the freckles that are starting to build up on the bridge of her nose and edges of her cheekbones. She's looking considerably healthier than last year, too. Steve knows she's been talking about trying to run long distance next year, and she's been spending some of her time away from the Post practicing. It seems to be working out well.

"You're going home?" Nancy's question is innocent and loaded all at once.

"If there's not a mutiny before I can unload the troublemakers." That's another new one; mutiny. Max added it to his vocabulary a week or so ago, Steve is pretty proud of the usage.

"Or a one man roadblock on your street." The joke is aimed at Hopper and, undoubtedly, the stories of his recent late night visit. Nancy wrinkles her nose at him in a silent smile, something so familiar and warm that it fends off the goosebumps threatened on his skin by the night air. "Let Joyce know when you make it."

"*Nance*," Steve stresses her name on the end of a sigh.

"I know." She cuts him off carefully and when he expects her to look away, to spare him her critical gaze and the fond curve of her lips, she refuses to let him break eye contact. "She worries."

They all worry. Steve knows that. He doesn't want to add to it, but the idea of calling Joyce while he's sitting alone in his house and staring at the soon-to-be repaired tiles in the kitchen and obsessing about the harsh silhouette over Hawkins, thinking maybe she deserves to know, maybe they should all be prepared, questioning whether or not it's right to rob them of the peace everyone is temporarily mulling about in...

"I know, I've got it." It's not appealing, to say the least. "I'll call Hopper."

Nancy gives him a hard look, probably picking apart the tight lines on his face and the white of his knuckles where he grips the car door and the edge of his center console. "Call Joyce."

"Nance," Steve tries again, and his resolve withers with the concern hidden in the crease between her brows. Giving a defeated sigh, he lets go of the door in favor of his steering wheel, fishes his keys out with the other. "I'll call her."

"Good."

An unsure pause follows her response and Nancy wavers where she stands before she leans down to hug him. The angle is awkward and his shoulder has to be stabbing her in the collarbone, but her chin is on his head and one of her hands lays on his shoulder and Steve can't help the way his throat closes and his mind shuts down. It's nice and comforting and full of more than words can capture, but it's too much. He wants to block her out, to find the walls he built up years ago and somehow forgot to maintain after he met her and these kids and the Byers and the Chief.

Steve finds that he doesn't want her compassion, her empathy, her understanding, her *apologies* whether they're silent like this one or spoken word. It clogs his airways and floods his veins with ice and pulls a scrunchie around his vocal cords. He isn't really sure what he wants, but he knows it isn't this right now. Not that he wants to be alone, either, but his options are limited while they're playing the silent game.

"Hey," He finds his voice, quiet as it is, and reaches up to pat her elbow. "We'll be fine."

When Nancy pulls away his lungs thank him and fill with air, and his eyes burn, and his hands feel unsteady. "I know." She leans down again, just a little, to point a finger toward the back seat. "If mom asks -"

"You're having dinner with Joyce." Mike recites easily, and Steve can feel him kicking his seat. "You owe me."

"Actually," The young woman starts and then cuts her eyes to Lucas

and changes her mind, giving her brother a dirty look. "Later." Nancy says pointedly. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Mike waits until Nancy has stepped back and shut the car door for Steve to scoff his response: "Short list."

Steve starts the car then, shaking his head and begging his palms to stop sweating. Ahead of his car Joyce is just now leaving, probably having given her older son a goodbye and some words of warning. And Jonathan is standing beside the passenger side door of his own car, waiting for Nancy. He says something that isn't loud enough to reach Steve's car, but the laugh he gets in response comes muffled through the windshield.

Considerate as a young man his age can be, Jonathan opens the door for her and shuts it gently once her leg is in the safe zone. Then he looks up, waving to the headlights of Steve's car before striding around the front end to get into his own car. The engine hums as he starts it and his headlights dye the trees a dirty yellow, casting stretching shadows behind them into the forest. They seem to mock him, taunting him in stiff waves as the beater LTD pulls away.

"Finally!" The groan from Mike is enough to make Steve shift into drive. Because, honestly, he isn't ready for another tirade of hormones and youthful energy tonight. "You all talk so much."

"You aren't any better." Steve shoots back as he takes a turn toward the main road. "Have you listened to yourself on the phone with El?"

Lucas, to his credit, takes the side of truth this time. "I'm pretty sure you spent *half* of our last session on the phone with her."

"No I didn't!" Mike sputters and in the rear view mirror Steve can see him crossing his arms. "At least I don't *bring* her to D and D night without running it by the whole Party first."

"She's *part* of the Party." Is the smooth rebuttal. "You said it yourself."

There's a moment where Mike seems to weigh that out. "Yeah," he grouses. "And I *regret* it, so..." He shuffles around, putting his elbow on the door and his chin in his hand as he glares out the window and

takes the loss. "So there."

Lucas accepts that happily, and occupies himself with comments on the display. For the first seven or so minutes of the drive, Mike studiously tries to ignore him. But the glances he steals at his friend and the way his eyebrows raise betrays him and, eventually, he gives up on feigning disinterest. The two of them fill the car with expletives and 'wow's, delayed reactions and loud imitations of the various noises the light show gave off.

Steve gives idle input when they aim a question his way, or toss a reflection toward him. Otherwise, he tries to focus on driving. On the roads that haven't changed since he was a kid, and the potholes he learned to maneuver around when he only had his permit to drive. The streetlights that don't, for now, decide to flicker and flash at him to foreshadow some ill-fated occurrence. A few cars pass him as he detours through downtown for the hell of it, along with a couple scattered groups of teenagers.

Hawkins is quiet other than that. It's gotten late, with the passing of the fireworks and the moon taking the lead in the sky with the stars as an ensemble. Most people are at home, sleeping or preparing to do so, or tucking their children in to try to prepare them for earlier bedtimes with the school year approaching in a month. Which leaves only a few intoxicated stragglers from the bar and families from their viewing points, navigating the streets and sidewalks.

Well, that and young adults surely making mischief. Drinking underage and ducking into side streets, around corners, to avoid the Chief as he surely patrols somewhere nearby. Stumbling home from house parties with frazzled grins and rumpled clothes, to avoid a lecture, or maybe making their way to the next party. It's a good holiday for parties, not that anyone needs to give the high-school students and (soon to be) college students an excuse to get a little out of hand. Regardless of how much is - or isn't - going on in Hawkins, someone is bound to make their own entertainment in less than savory ways.

And once they've taken the left out of downtown and toward the residential side, there's practically nothing. Homes with dimmed lights and grills still letting off the last wisps of their smoke in

parting. It's not shocking. The Mancels live on the other side of town, near Steve, and the lake is too far out to see any lights from parked cars and late parties where stories are being made by the minute.

The turn onto Lucas's road comes first and his departure, full of convivial jeers and plans for tomorrow, breaks the thoughts of the life inside Hawkins. Mike is one a few streets away from there, which doesn't give Steve any time to mull over his lack of excitement either.

"You're bringing Dustin to D and D tomorrow." Mike tells him as he slams the car door shut, and hollers his next words through the barrier of metal and glass. "We'll make you a shorthand dictionary!"

And then he, too, is gone. The abruptness isn't unusual coming from him, nor is the telling-not-asking for his rascal transportation services. Still, the sudden lack of anyone else is striking. It's just Steve, in his car, slowly signalling and turning out of the rows of houses to make his way to his own. Steve and the headlights of his car, dusting everything framed by the windshield with light. Steve and the shadows of the tall, bent lamps beside the street, and the bushes that shift as the fluorescent glow bends around the leaves.

Needless to say, the ride to his own house seems to last a lifetime. In reality Steve knows it's only ten, maybe fifteen, minutes to make it from point a (the Wheeler's home) to point b (his home) but time pulls his leg and makes the minutes slide by like molasses. The car seems to be crawling along, and the surroundings seem to be repeating through the windows as he passes by, and the stars overhead skip further and further from him the longer he has his foot on the pedal.

It's not until he's well past the last house, coming down the wind of his own road, that Steve realizes something is wrong.

Or maybe not *wrong* but certainly not *right*. The Mancels house, at the end of the last street he passed, had been dark. The whole neighborhood had been dark. Sleeping, as is appropriate at this time of the night when you have responsibilities and work looming with the sun rising and the morning creeping up on the town.

Steve tells himself, over and over, that Hopper likely busted up their

party and sent everyone packing. Or the Mancel sisters got drunk enough to turn into the Terrible Two, a nickname they grew into a few years ago when they evicted everyone from a party at a senior's house that they didn't even know. Which, they found out with time, was just sort of their thing when they got intoxicated enough to be done with the partying. Perhaps their parents came back early from their visit to the school their elder daughter should be attending, and broke it up themselves.

*All of these are likely options*, Steve figures, *that's how things go sometimes*. So he brushes it off, and moves on to wondering where the drinking adventures moved on to. Tommy's or Carol's, though he knows from seeing both of their parents in town that it isn't likely. Definitely not the Hargroves, considering no one has even spoken of even setting foot inside that house. Another recently graduated peer, then?

Sandy Pulice, the girl with a sizeable yard and a single father who sleeps like a rock? Nathan 'Natty' Newman, the class clown with the charming green eyes and messy bob of golden hair who lives with his deaf grandmother and has a basement full of paraphernalia? Maybe everyone has just relocated to the lake. It's still warm enough for people to crash in their cars and lawn chairs and the grass without freezing, but not so hot that they'll wake up baked like clams. The water is probably a pleasant lukewarm temperature now too, from the sunny day, the illuminations in the sky probably seemed like an abstract painting where it reflected on the surface of the body of water.

These are all things that Steve misses - he thinks he misses, sometimes, but he isn't really sure. His partying and jovial tomfoolery have lessened significantly, over the past couple years. In part because of all they've been through, all Hawkins as been through. It's more due to realizing who he was, and hating it, and trying to change. Steve still gets his kicks, makes questionable decisions when the desire strikes him, it's just not quite as often as it used to be.

He hasn't even hosted a party in his own home since... It's hard to remember when. Since Barb? Has it been that long? Letting other people walk into a space full of so *much* of something he has no word for just hasn't felt right. Steve isn't sure he could look across the pool,

see people congregating around the lip and by the stairs with a backdrop of sinister penumbra and trees, and feel the same way he used to.

On the last turn, the one that veers into his wide driveway and acts as the welcome mat to the Harrington homestead, Steve is bowled over with the knowledge that his night isn't quite over yet.